MRS. BRAND

H. A. MITCHELL KEAYS

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A NOVEL

By H. A. MITCHELL KEAYS

Author of "The Road to Damascus," "He that Eateth Bread with Me" "The Marriage Portion," etc.

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MRS. BRAND

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CHAPTER I

It was growing cold. Mr. Overholt felt the bleakness of the wind on his face, and he buttoned his coat more closely about him, as he left his house and swung down the street. He was feeling at his best to-night. Hope and ambition generally run high in the young man, and he was a young man with hope and ambition at least temporarily satisfied. He had attained the position he had sought, and yet he had succeeded by the most simple means in accomplishing what older and honored men had wrecked their dignity in a vain attempt to acquire. To be sure, he was on a three months' trial, as it were, but with the result of two Sundays behind him he had no doubt as to his complete giving of satisfaction.

He had laid his plans well. And he had carried them out as well as he had laid them. From the very day that he had read in his village weekly of the death of Dr. Marvin of Glenedge, he had made as strategical an attack on the dead man's shoes as it was possible to conceive. The introduction of his name to the supply committee by a brother minister, who had been tried and found wanting, had put him in touch with his goal, and the rest had been comparatively easy. A trip to Chicago and Glenedge, a frank statement of his plans to the committee, and a carefully planned although seemingly extemporaneous address at their prayer-meeting, which had created an instant impression, had been followed by a conversation with the great man of the church, a wholesale merchant in the city, a Mr. Brand. Mr. Overholt had not been surprised by the invitation extended to him, and he had accepted with a gravity that was a mask only to a triumphal surge of feeling, which lent him a most captivating animation.

But he had delighted in the surprise he had given his wife upon his return home. He had called her to him, and she had hurried over to him with quick eagerness, and, sinking down on a footstool beside him, had leaned her head against his knee with a timid happiness that he divined. His eye traversed her frail figure and dwelt upon her thin, tiny hands with a certain satisfaction. Strangers could not deny the extreme delicacy of her appearance, and it was not needful that one should say more than that it had been characteristic of her even when her health was better. He had softly stroked her hair as he told her of his trip, and the exultation in his voice was answered by a glowing happiness that made her radiant.

" I'm so glad for you —— "

He had cut her off.

" It will be better for you," he had interjected. " Oh, of course there's nothing the matter with you, and the doctors in Chicago are worse than the one here. Well, we won't argue about it. And I don't have to resign here," he had added with an easy laugh. " The Glenedge church pays its supplies pretty heavily, and I can fill in easily with some fellow during my absence."

Now, a few weeks later, he was on his way to the Brand mansion as an invited guest. " I expect Mrs. Brand home from a visit to-morrow, and you had better come in and take dinner with us and a nephew of ours, Dr. Challoner," Mr. Brand had said. "We can talk over church matters a little. I wish Mrs. Overholt could come, too," he added, kindly.

"Yes, it is too bad. But the necessary upset in coming to Glenedge has prostrated her, and she must have perfect quiet."

As the servant ushered him across the wide, beautiful hall into the drawing-room, the minister experienced a thrill of kinship with his surroundings that affected him deliciously. After the arid monotony of recent years — this was life. The satin draperies were crushed aside, and his hand hospitably grasped by that of his host, who led him into a room that seemed to shimmer in amber-hued radiance.

"You're just on time. I see you're a punctual man, like myself," said Mr. Brand, cordially. "My dear," he added, turning towards a lady who sat beside the hearth listlessly watching the flames. Mrs. Brand rose up, slowly, indifferently. Another one of the endless chain of ministers! She stepped forward, her hand politely extended to her husband's guest. But her proud eyes met his only for a moment, and then, though the composure of her face was apparently unstirred, she found herself in her chair again with the sluggish current of her life lashed into mad motion by unexpected revelation. There was a blur of voices in her ears, a black dance in her eyes; her heart seemed gripped by fingers of steel.

Mr. Overholt felt suddenly at variance with his environment, for he was unused to hauteur in women, by whom he had always been encouraged to consider himself the focal point of the surrounding universe, and though he glided easily into conversation with Mr. Brand, his mind was active in speculation upon the woman, who might be unconscious of his proximity to her for all the evidence she gave to the contrary. Her face was shielded from him, but her pose and the sweeping curves of her figure tormented him with subtle challenge, and his eye, greedy always of beauty of form and color, fastened upon her again and again. The dull red of her velvet gown, with the filmly fretwork of lace about her throat and arms, the gleam upon her restless fingers — no, she was distinctly not the kind of wife that one would naturally impute to John Brand.

"Where is Arthur?" inquired Mr. Brand, suddenly, with a dinner-time edge to his voice.

"Oh, he's coming. We must wait for him."

The tone of her voice, and the peculiar, little gesture of her head — where had he noticed them before? A sudden suspicion edged its way to his mind. If she would only lift her eyes. She must; he would make her do that. Perhaps Mrs. Brand felt the pressure of his silent demand upon her, for she pushed her chair sharply back a few inches and turned her face towards him; their eyes met for a brief moment.

The outer door gave a distant clang, and almost immediately a young man hurried into the room. "Now, I've kept you waiting, haven't I? It's too bad. Mr. Overholt? Yes! I don't attend that church as a rule, but it has certainly been fine fun lately sampling the supplies."

At the dinner table Mr. Brand monopolized the conversation, according to his wont. His position in the world held a never-ending fascination for him, and sooner or later it was inevitable that he should speak of the time when he had but one shirt, which his first wife washed and ironed while he slept. "I tell you what it is," he said to-night, "if these fellows who are always grumbling because my money isn't theirs would do as I did for a while they wouldn't have time for so many theories."

"How was that?" inquired Mr. Overholt.

"Let them get along for years with four hours for sleep a day, and then lie awake to worry out the next scheme, like I did," replied Mr. Brand. "They look at me now and say: 'He don't do a thing to earn all that money. We have more right to it than he has.' Have they? A man has got to earn his first thousand with the sweat of his brow, and if he's half smart it will take care of itself and him too after that. And it's precisely that thousand that they want me to earn for them."

"Yes, you're quite correct," said Mr. Overholt. "A great deal of nonsense is talked about the working man just now. You might almost suppose that it was criminal for a man to be industrious and saving. I believe the working class generally is getting the idea that it must be made self-supporting by law and not by labor."

"You're right there," said Mr. Brand, approvingly.

Although Mr. Overholt bent an attentive ear to his host's reminiscences, every faculty he had was engaged in the solution of the problem that had put him on the rack. "The devil!" he had ejaculated mentally, as Mrs. Brand's defiant gaze had revealed her identity to him. How could such a thing be possible? That here, in this proud and splendid woman, he should suddenly find himself face to face with that almost forgotten love-affair ——, he studied her furtively, his mind in a whirl of amazement and anxiety. He recalled her from among numerous skeletons of the past, an odd kind of girl with unexpected streaks of brilliance and daring that at first fascinated, and finally wearied him. She had been a shabby creature to whom clothes could only have figured as a necessity, and in that respect he could find no trace of her in the woman opposite. As the dinner progressed through its courses he felt a rising irritation at her complete preoccupation in the young man beside her. They seemed to be on the best of terms with each other.

When they rose from the table Mr. Brand led his guest into the library, but Mrs. Brand went into the drawing-room, and Dr. Challoner followed her.

"Who is this fellow?" he inquired, as they stood together looking down at the wreathing flames in the grate.

"He? Oh, the new minister, or supply, or what not, for 'The Pilgrims.'" There was more than contempt in her tones, and Dr. Challoner looked at her with some amusement.

"What is it? Don't you like him?"

"Like him!" The vehemence in her voice was surprising. Then after a moment she said lightly enough, "Dear no! What difference does it make to me what he's like?"

Yet as Mr. Overholt and her husband crossed the room towards her she shivered with dread. She felt afraid of her own tongue even, lest it should suddenly, involuntarily, reveal the past behind them both, and she looked at him with quick, unconscious question in her eyes. But he was absorbed in his own problems.

"Mr. Brand has been telling me of your work in the slums," he said hesitatingly to Dr. Challoner. "I did not quite understand."

Dr. Challoner smiled. "There are other physicians here, as you may know. So I have adopted another field of work, but not here in Glenedge."

"You must let me do something more than cheaply sympathize," continued the minister. As he spoke Mr. Overholt opened his pocket-book, and drew out a bill. With a really tender heart for the sufferings of others he combined a gaudy generosity that frequently paid him a handsome dividend on the investment.

"Oh, no!" said Dr Challoner, drawing back. "I do not beg for my people." He felt a sudden, unreasonable aversion to taking the money.

"You had better take it, Arthur. I do not suppose it will choke anyone." Mrs. Brand had not meant to speak, but the hidden rush of feeling had its way with her, and she heard her own voice with a feeling of terror. Her remark acted on Mr. Overholt like a lash. He moved directly before her, and looking down at her steadily with those blue eyes in whose amorous depths she had once lost herself, he said coolly: "Thank you, Mrs. Brand. I admire the fine discrimination of that remark."

The hands lying in her lap began to tremble; she felt his pitiless gaze upon them. The old, forgotten fear of him, the fear so subtly mingled with ignorance and admiration by which he had compelled her girlish love, awoke in her again. He divined it, and in one triumphant instant he felt himself safe. No, she had not told her husband, and she never would.

"Your aunt," he said, turning to Dr. Challoner with an easy smile ——

"Aunt!" exclaimed Mrs. Brand. It was such a relief to seize an outside topic. "I draw the line at aunthood," she said decisively.

"Yes, we tried it for a year, and it didn't work. But it's too long a story now." Dr. Challoner smiled, and rose to go.

"Must you be off, my boy? Well, don't forget the way to my pocket-book when anyone down there needs helping out."

"All right, uncle. It's a well beaten track." And the doctor was gone.

The dread of a possible tête-à-tête forced itself upon Mrs. Brand. Her husband was an old man, and if his guest remained much later he would certainly resign himself to his evening paper towards which his eyes were yearning even now. "I think I'll amuse myself, and give you gentlemen a chance to talk church to your heart's content," she said abruptly.

After a while the conversation in the drawing-room lagged conspicuously, and still Mr. Overholt waited. He was busy importuning Fate for a lead that he could follow. And presently there floated towards him faint fragments of a melody, at once alluring and evasive.

"How beautifully Mrs. Brand plays! Do you think she would resent my listening to her a little nearer?"

"Why, no," exclaimed Mr. Brand heartily, his hand already on his paper. "Follow the sound, and you'll find her." And with a sigh of relief he was lost in a study of black and white.

Mrs. Brand, piling one passionate crescendo upon another, felt rather than saw the minister beside her. She played on, and he, leaning against the piano watching her face in the dim light, was stirred by memories of the very existence of which he had been hitherto unconscious. It seemed but yesterday that he had held her in his arms, and felt the meeting of her lips upon his, and now, what a gulf lay between! Perhaps the pressure of the past grew at that moment unendurable to her, for her hands dropped with a sudden crash on the key-board.

"Why did you stop? I never heard anyone play so beautifully," he said sincerely.

She laughed scornfully. "Yes, I play very well," she answered with impartial chill. "It would be strange if I did not."

"We don't all succumb to training so easily. But most of us can learn enough to recognize our mistakes," he remarked experimentally.

Mrs. Brand rose from the piano.

"No, don't go. There is something I must say to you." In his insistence he laid his hand upon her arm, soft and white above her bracelet. She quivered helplessly, and stood still, waiting.

"My wife is here, sick and alone. She is a good, little woman, and it would grieve me if she had to suffer for my sins. May I not hope that she may have you for her friend?"

"Your wife," repeated Mrs. Brand slowly. "How long have you been married?"

"Four years and a half."

He had not married her at once then.

Instinctively he divined her thought.

"I did not marry Mary Moore."

"You did not!"

"You must remember," he answered quickly, the tang of bitterness in his voice, "that you refused any explanation whatever; that my letters were returned to me unopened, and that when I went to your home to explain matters personally, I found that you had consoled yourself by marriage, and were gone,— to Hell for all that I cared."

His vehemence so subtly calculated was not without its balm to her.

"But how could you possibly expect to explain ——"

"I didn't," he broke in eagerly, "but a man is never a fool in his own estimate. I admit it all. Anything you like to say or think of me. But now —" he paused significantly — "what explanation is possible to me now? And yet my wife — it would mean so much to her —" and then as if mastered by an impulse that would not yield, he added, impetuously, "You will understand so many things when you see her."

Suddenly she held out her hand. In the flood that threatened to sweep her away from her accustomed moorings far out upon the unknown depths of experience she was glad to grasp at something definite.

"I will come and see your wife," she said simply, and together they passed out into the mellow radiance beyond them.

CHAPTER II

Long hours after Mr. Overholt had sunk into sleep, kaleidoscopic with brilliant dreams in which now the church of the Pilgrim Fathers, and now Mrs. Brand appeared to lay themselves at his aspiring feet, Mrs. Brand herself remained awake, staring with wide-open eyes into the darkness where the memories of the past took sombre shape. She saw herself a girl again, and her heart ached for that girl. Aunt Lavinia,— could anything have mitigated the misery of living with Aunt Lavinia, whose reputation for piety was a thing to conjure with,— outside her own home? Her facility in prayer was such that she was constantly in demand, and her missionary zeal left nothing out, except, of course, her husband and her wretched little niece, equal burdens upon the soaring pinions of her sanctity. But when Cecily graduated from High School, a lank, ungainly girl, and Aunt Lavinia was silently exultant to think that now at last she could transfer those ignominious duties of house-keeping and home-making that had so cruelly enslaved her hitherto, it was discovered that Uncle Ben had other and obstinately rooted ideas in regard to the future of his niece.

"You intend to send her to college!" reiterated Aunt Lavinia for the twentieth time, grimly doubting the evidence of her ears, and Uncle Ben himself trembled at hearing his dreams of independence thus assailed.

"Well," he admitted reluctantly, "she's too smart not to have a chance."

"Too smart," screamed Aunt Lavinia, by way of working up to a wild outburst of tears. "Oh, yes, to be sure. It's only dull people like me ——"

"Well, my dear," said Uncle Ben, unwittingly allowing his tongue a loop-hole of escape from between his teeth, "I should think Cecily's going away to college would be a great relief to you, for you have always said what a burden she was, and how differently you could arrange your life if she wasn't here."

So Cecily went to college, and when she came back every now and then Uncle Ben felt repaid for the wounds which that war had inflicted. Aunt Lavinia's exhortations had lost their terrors for the girl, and she could afford to smile about them now. For life had all at once become very sweet to Cecily, and she expanded like a rose beneath the maturing influence of sun and shower.

"Why, Cecily, you're getting to be quite a beauty."

"Oh no, Uncle Ben, just healthy and happy, thanks to you."

Eugene Overholt! In letters of fire the name defined itself against the mid-night gloom. Why had he ever crossed her path? He was a student like herself, but in the Theological Department, and when they first became acquainted she had taken no pains to encourage the intimacy for that very reason. She despised theologues. Alas! it was precisely this aloofness that enhanced her attractiveness to the budding pastor, who had not hitherto suffered feminine rebuff and found the experience delightfully stimulating, and as time went on the piquant flavor of this flirtation developed in him a passion for the answer to a question which bewitched him,—"She loves me, she loves me not!"

It was years since she had re-incarnated the ghosts of memory as she was doing to-night. Her brain reeled and her heart grew sick. Even in the darkness she felt the blood rush hotly to her face as she realized how complete had been his conquest at last. Had he ever forgotten that evening, when after the manner of their kind, they had wandered far out upon a quiet country road, and as the shadows deepened she had leaned towards him, and intoxicated with the bliss of loving and of being loved had kissed him of her own accord for the first time.

"—— All thy passions matched with mine,
Are as moonlight unto sunlight and as water unto wine."

Her lips curled. Ah, was it so? And then that letter — that terrible letter. They had both graduated, and he had gone out West to take charge of a little church, while she was to spend her time in teaching until their marriage. After a few weeks his letters grew duller and briefer than even his inaptitude as a correspondent warranted, but she made tender excuse for him in her heart,—he was so busy caring for his flock and composing the sermons that must be masterpieces of pleading. Under the stimulus of preparing herself to be a fitting help-mate for him she turned towards religion, and for the first time in her harried youth she felt herself at peace with God and nature.

One day the postman handed an unusually bulky letter with a smile of kindly comprehension. She flew with her treasure to her room, her heart throbbing with anticipation. As she whisked by her chair she caught sight of herself in the mirror, and stood still for an instant to apostrophize the radiant reflection of her happiness. If only a photographer had been by to immortalize that moment and himself, it would have covered a multitude of sins. It was Cecily's last glimpse of her girlhood. She tore open the envelope greedily. "My darling Mary —" What did it mean? She stared stupidly at it for a moment, and then turned to the end of the letter. "Your devoted Eugene." A prescient chill seized her heart and she sat quite still staring dully at the wall before her. The letter spoke for itself. One term of endearment followed another, and as she rigidly exhausted page after page it dawned at last upon her to whom they were addressed,— pretty, little Mary Moore, a fellow student whom Nature had clearly ordained for decorative rather than intellectual ends. "Mary, Mary Moore," she repeated with passionate contempt. These love-lured sentences, the very ones indeed over which her own, shy lips had lingered, how sickening they were in the fierce light of this revelation. Even the sudden thought that no doubt the letter he had written her was already in the hands of Mary Moore was powerless to inflict a sharper sting upon her. Hour after hour she sat there, alone with her dead dreams, until the darkness of night penetrated her benumbed consciousness. Then she staggered to her feet, only to sink weakly upon her knees beside her bed, there to surrender herself to the storm that swept her before it like chaff.

Six weeks later she married John Brand, a life-long friend of good Uncle Ben's whose "Nunc Dimitis" over the event seemed to her quite sufficient warrant for it. But she was no unwilling bride. In those six weeks she accumulated a stock of worldly maxims which would have graced a hoary head. Love? Sentiment? Bah! And to John Brand, madly in love and proportionately vain over the discovery after the manner of men of his years, there was a delicious fascination in those garish statements from her ripe, young lips. "Love you? Oh no. Please don't marry me on any such basis as that. You are a good man, I think, and I am satisfied with that. I don't see why people should make two fools of themselves over this particular species of contract. You don't think it necessary to go into rhapsodies over your business partner or to sit for hours gazing into his eyes like an owl."

On religious matters she was equally explicit. "I respect your beliefs," she said tolerantly, "but personally I see no reason for believing in them." Still he felt no discouragement, for he relied upon contact with himself to effect an easy transformation of these girlish crudities, and it was no doubt a distinct shock to him later on, when sentiment so dealt with in the abstract loomed up concretely in the form of a decided refusal to say her prayers before she went to bed. This was outraging to one's ideals of womanhood. But as time went on they settled down into a sort of Darby and Joan jog-trot in which each conceded a little to the other's gait. If Mr. Brand became conscious of a lack in his wife, which he would have hesitated to analyze, he attributed it broadly to a temperament superior to the vulgar manifestations of affection. As for jealously,— he would have laughed at the bare idea. Bless my heart! What could any other man have given her that she didn't have as his wife. She was a fancy article, to be sure, and as such not to be judged by standards applicable to grosser moulds.

The night wore on, deepening at last into the chill darkness of the coming dawn. Her husband slept heavily beside her. How old and ashen his face had looked against the vigorous glow of that other one! And she had thought it possible by one wild plunge to fix a gulf forever between her present and her past! Poor fool!

But she had no thought of the revenge which Mr. Overholt dreaded, for the possibility of his becoming the pastor of the church of the Pilgrim Fathers had not suggested itself to her. Her only anxiety was to bear herself towards him with a dignity befitting her present station in the world. The sooner he discovered what a small place that insignificant love-affair occupied in her remembrance, the better it would be. She would have been less the woman, however, if she had not discovered some sweet subleties of compliment in his inability immediately to recognize her. She almost laughed as she recalled how she must have appeared in those student days during her incomplete emancipation from Aunt Lavinia's sway. For to Aunt Lavinia any theory that regarded clothes as other than a mere envelope for perishable human frames was an invention of the devil. So it was not strange that Overholt had failed to recognize in the woman she was now the girl who had once been his sweetheart. Oh well! She would take good care that he should find out the change in her outward appearance, great as it might be, was slight in comparison with those more complex changes that separate the simple-hearted girl from the woman of the world it pleased her to think herself.

Naturally enough, it had been a great shock to her, this unexpected meeting, but as she dwelt upon it the situation defined itself to her more clearly, and her imagination exploited its possible phases in a way that reflected great credit upon her capacity. After all, it was but fair that she should be just enough to admit that there might be changes in Mr. Overholt equal to those in herself. Certainly Mr. Brand seemed captivated by him, and he was not given to making mistakes in his judgments.

In this as in many debates with herself that succeeded it, Mrs. Brand took account of everything except herself. There was nothing abnormal about her failure to do this, for she was not more ignorant of the mental and moral ingredients of which she was composed than are most mortals.

CHAPTER III

It was a cold afternoon towards the close of December, when Mrs. Brand stepped into her carriage to go and call upon Mrs. Overholt. She had met the minister a good many times since that evening, but there had been no reference to a past which they were equally anxious to ignore. But the attitude that Mrs. Brand had so confidently prescribed for herself she found difficult to preserve. What object was there in planting her personal vicinity with signs that read plainly, " Keep off the grass," only to have them unnoticed and trampled down at the pleasure of the intruder who calmly assumed her consent.

It was gradually becoming an assured fact that Mr. Overholt would be called to the pastorate of the church. His own rating of himself had apparently been a conservative one, judged by the enthusiasm of the growing congregations that assembled to give him a hearing. From the very first, the circumstances of his advent among them had been a sort to awaken sympathy, and when he appeared a few Sundays after his arrival tenderly leading up the aisle his little wife, frail and sweet as a passing flower, there were even some moist eyes among those who eagerly devoured the spectacle he had prepared for them. He understood the importance of accessories as thoroughly as any stage manager, but his game was worth the candle.

It was natural that he should become a frequent visitor at the Brands. There were many things about which he desired the deacon's opinion. "I do want to revive the work as well as I can while I am here," he said whole-heartedly, "and it's astonishing the disorganization that sets in when a church is so long without a pastor. Why, some of the societies have gone utterly to smash,—I can't even find the pieces."

"Perhaps that's a providential dispensation," remarked Mr. Brand dryly.

"I shouldn't wonder. There's another thing I noticed. Most churches have a couple of vicious, old cranks in them, but there are more to the square yard in this church than in any I ever heard of. It strikes me there are quite a few of your members who are going to be the kind of angels that need asbestos wings."

Mrs. Brand laughed. "You appear to be somewhat heated yourself," she said demurely. "Who has been trying a game of theological tag on you to-day?"

Conversations such as these did not calculate to foster the chilling reserve which she had foreordained for herself. But in her calculations she had quite overlooked the resources of "the party of the second part," and before long she realized that an iceberg drifting steadily south might as well avoid disintegrating influences.

It was with an odd variety of sensations that she grasped the hand of the "good, little woman," who was not to suffer for her husband's sins. She had come armed with all the conscious panoply of place and prestige, but her heart melted at the sight of the wan, little face so timidly lifted to her own.

"But are you really better?" she inquired doubtfully, after they had consumed some time in the verbal moves of polite society.

"Oh yes," replied Mrs. Overholt with conviction. "There is really nothing the matter — it is just my husband's anxiety," she added with a little color rising in her face.

Mrs. Brand smiled tolerantly. Mr. Overholt's words, "When you see my wife you will understand many things," came back to her mind. Yes, indeed. She sat for a moment in silence staring absently at the fire and the grinning spectres in its red depths.

"Are you pleasantly situated here?" she asked abruptly but not unkindly, her eyes travelling in critical survey around the room.

"Oh yes, all things considered. It was very fortunate that we could rent the house furnished for the two months."

"We have a beautiful parsonage. It would be a nice place to live in," said Mrs. Brand, but Mrs. Overholt answered with gravity, "Yes, I suppose it would."

"Have many of our ladies called on you?"

"A few." A worried, little crease appeared in Mrs. Overholt's forehead.

"They ask so many questions," she hazarded shyly.

"I could not have believed it — especially of Mrs. Crumpet," exclaimed Mrs. Brand wickedly. Then they both laughed, and after that everything was easy.

"But fortunately they are not all like Mrs. Crumpet. I think I shall have to coach you a little, for I know exactly how they will pump you. Do you think, for instance, that you would like to live in Glenedge?" Her quick ear had caught the sound of the street door, and a subsequent rustle in the room that was connected by an arch with the one in which she and Mrs. Overholt were sitting. Instinctively she began to play a part for the benefit of an unseen hearer. "The answer to that question is self-evident, only the young and thoughtless would ask it. Glenedge and Paradise are synonymous terms. About them one must cherish hopes, but never opinions."

Mrs. Overholt looked perplexed, but her lips assumed a patient, little smile.

"Is your husband an early riser?" demanded Mrs. Brand relentlessly with so exact an assumption of the manner of which the minister's wife had already had an experience that it was impossible not to laugh.

"Well of course it makes a difference ——"

"Nothing ever makes any difference in a minister's family. You must say that your breakfast hour is half-past six, or Mrs. Deacon Humdrum would be shocked at your shiftlessness. The Humdrums weary of life every evening at half-past eight, and never have breakfast later than six o'clock, no matter how many hours of sleep they have suffered from. I have a slavish admiration for Mrs. Humdrum. She seems to think she is the understudy of my guardian angel, and after the sermons she always feels impelled to force a special application of it to my needs."

"I suppose you are very active in the church?"

"I? Oh, no! I take no interest in it whatever, — not in the way you mean. But as a spectator I get a great deal out of it. It is such an admirable stamping-ground, and necessarily, I have always been intimate with the minister's family."

"How strange!"

"That I should be intimate with the minister's family?" And wilfully misinterpreting the remark Mrs. Brand rushed on. "Yes, isn't it comical. Of course you never saw Dr. Marvin! The dearest old antediluvian. He was a valuable relic."

Mrs. Overholt had never heard anyone talk of the ministerial species like this before, and she looked a little troubled.

"But I was fond of Dr. Marvin. He never nagged me about my soul; he only prayed about it, and I quite approve of that. But Mrs. Marvin was different. She would nag if you got caught alone with her. But you aren't like that? You aren't afflicted with a heroic sense of duty, I hope?"

"No," replied Mrs. Overholt earnestly. "I'm afraid I'm very negligent about those things. I don't think I was cut out for a pastor's wife."

She looked so mournful that Mrs. Brand laughed. "You poor, little thing," was her inward comment; "in the hands of the Tom, Dick and Harry Humdrums."

"Be thankful you weren't," she said aloud. "One would suppose to hear some people talk that there were three sexes, Men, Women and Ministers' Wives."

"May I come in?" said a voice behind her as she finished speaking. "Mrs. Brand, how kind this is of you! Why, dear, you look positively giddy." And Mr. Overholt sank wearily into his big chair before the fire. "What have you two been gossiping about?" he asked, with an admirable display of innocence.

"Oh, ministers,—and people," said Mrs. Overholt vaguely.

"That's a fine distinction, and I'm dreadfully afraid that Mrs. Brand is responsible for it," hinted Mr. Overholt.

"No, I think that's original with Mrs. Overholt," retorted Mrs. Brand. "But it has my approval."

"Why?"

For the life of him he could not resist the query. While he was intermittently the victim of alarms regarding this woman, the situation had developed charms for him which outweighed its perils.

"Don't you know?" she asked, with a challenge in her dark eyes that he accepted and returned on the fly, while Mrs. Overholt sat silent in innocent admiration of the enigmas surrounding her. "Oh, you surely wouldn't submit to being classed among people, common, vulgar people who have to be kept under by commandments and all that sort of thing?"

He felt the flash in her eyes. "Oh, spare us — the poor ministers," he replied with collective prudence. "I'm sure you would if you only knew the tortures I've endured dashing civility around the parish this afternoon. There's Mrs. Kelly, for instance, who thinks my sermons 'too kind of pretty' to impress the intellect of Allen Edward, 'and I shall look to you, Mr. Overholt, to gather that precious sheaf into the harvest. We are regular contributors to the pastor's support.'"

"That woman," said Mrs. Brand, "has a head for business."

"So I concluded. And fortunately at the request of the treasurer I had looked over his books with him the other day thereby placing myself in a position to say promptly to Mrs. Kelly:

'Then I am to infer that you wish ten dollars' worth of salvation injected into your son annually.' "

"Oh, lovely!" exclaimed Mrs. Brand, with an outburst of laughter. "But how could you do it?"

"It takes some initial grit," he replied modestly. "But that woman will cleave to me now like a kicked cur. And Mrs. Wigley," he continued, reminiscent of his experiences, "who hopes that if I am called to this church, of which she has evidently the gravest doubts, I shall make it the particular aim of my ministry to become intimate with her children. 'They are unusually bright, Mr. Overholt, and I know that you would find them most inspiring. It is not for my children that I am pleading, Mr. Overholt, it is for your own good that I speak so frankly. I think you should make a point of mingling with the young people freely.' "

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. That crushed me. I wrung the unselfish mother's hand in trembling silence and departed much affected. I wound up my tribulations with Mrs. Gasch, who hopes that Mrs. Overholt is not as frivolous as she looks."

"Oh, don't," protested Mrs. Brand, "that abominable, little woman."

"I did my best to ease her mind. I told her that I would mention her feelings to the committee, and would do my utmost to prevent their extending a call to Mrs. Overholt. With that I sweetly smiled myself away, and left Mrs. Gasch quite agitated, I think."

"Well, I really don't think that you have any reason to feel blue over your afternoon's work. And I don't think Mrs. Overholt need feel frightened over these dreadful accounts of the parish. There are nice people here, and I have been doing my best to prepare her to meet the horrid ones. But there's one thing I have forgotten, and I know Mrs. Humdrum won't. Mrs. Overholt," she began with tremendous solemnity, "I trust that your husband does not defile himself with the deadly weed. That is the one thing upon which I must satisfy my conscience with regard to him."

An expression of agony appeared upon Mrs. Overholt's countenance.

"Why, my dear, of course he smokes," said Mrs. Brand consolingly. "They all do. Even Dr. Marvin."

"What, now?" interposed Mr. Overholt, in a tone of horror.

Mrs. Brand dismissed him with a lofty glance. "I caught him at it once, but I vowed I'd never tell, and I think that was why he was so nice to me. But when Mrs. Humdrum assaults you on the subject you must look perfectly shocked and say, 'Oh Mrs. Humdrum, did Dr. Marvin do that? How dreadful!' That will be sufficient. She will nearly have a fit at the bare suggestion, and as she only has accommodations for one idea at a time you'll get off easily."

Mrs. Brand rose, gathering about her the sumptuous wrap that had fallen from her shoulders. "Of course you have family prayers," she remarked suggestively. "I know a family who got up quite a reputation for piety by reading Tennyson between the courses. The unsuspicious Swede was much impressed by the spectacle, and talked it up accordingly. Unfortunately the family was not dependent upon a reputation of that kind, and so they told the story on themselves. I merely offer this as a suggestion." She met Mr. Overholt's eye defiantly.

"Don't you think you're cruel?" he asked quietly.

"I? Cruel? What a funny thing for you to say."

He looked at her resentfully. How long was she going to bully him with that? But she had crossed over to his wife, and taking the little hands in her own with a charming gesture she said, "My dear, we shall be friends. And don't let anyone worry you into trying to turn yourself inside out for the sake of being sociable. Sociable?" She dwelt on the word with contemptuous emphasis. "It's a depraved word."

Mr. Overholt escorted her to her carriage, but in the vestibule she paused a moment to draw her wrap closer about her throat.

"Ah, permit me!" he exclaimed with the ready gallantry so characteristic of him, and before she could utter a protest his fingers were busy with the troublesome clasp. The color flew burning into her face, and then with impetuous defiance of the gaze she divined upon her she raised her eyes to his.

"What kept you so long?" inquired Mrs. Overholt, when her husband returned. She had been watching the departure of her visitor from a distinctly feminine standpoint — the parlor window.

"Oh, some bother about her cape. I suppose women like to have their clothes so complicated as to demand a little masculine assistance now and then."

"Mean old thing," declared his wife, pounding his knee prettily with her little fists. She sat down on a low chair beside him, and leaned her head against his arm, and he stroked her soft cheek tenderly, with fingers in which a thrill still lingered.

Lilias McMichael was the only child of wealthy parents, and had been reared with all the care that their love for her had prompted. When the lover, who had subjugated first herself and then her parents by his charm, became the equally devoted and attentive husband, she wondered in the humble innocence of her bursting little heart what she had done to deserve so great a gift. She was not beautiful, but she was an exquisitely dainty maiden, and her lines had kindly fallen to her in places that made no harassing demands upon her intellectually. If there were things about her husband that sometimes puzzled her crinkly little brain she contracted, in due course of time, a satisfactory habit of dismissing them with the reflection that it was not to be expected that she should always understand him. And when upon her father's death a year or two after her marriage, it was discovered that the fortune that it had been his life work to acquire had vanished in a cloud of speculation, her husband's bearing during that time must have been a signal disappointment to the people who had hinted that his affection for her was other than a purely unselfish one.

"Why, my dear little child," he protested, gathering his grief-stricken wife in his arms, "do you suppose I want any apologies from you about your father's affairs? Anyone would think to hear you talk that I had married you simply because you were an heiress." And yet that was precisely why he had married her, as he realized at this moment. But he had a saving contempt for retrospect, and a profound assurance regarding his future which served to mitigate the force of untoward circumstances. And little Lilias Overholt, being unimaginative, and not given to making critical analyses of character, was spared some discoveries that might have disturbed her serenity.

So it might be inferred that there was a wide gulf between the thoughts of these two as they sat there in the twilight together.

"That woman is as dangerous as a keg of gunpowder," thought Mr. Overholt.

But the dangers of gunpowder have never outweighed its attractiveness for the male half of creation.

A few days after this Mrs. Brand called by previous arrangement to take the invalid for a drive. "There is no hurry," she said to the servant, who explained that her mistress was not quite ready. She idly picked up a book lying on the table, and found herself unable to repress a smile at the title, "Wives of Men of Genius." But after running over its pages she laid it back upon the table with an angry bang. When her indignation had had time to subside somewhat her attention was attracted by a noise outside the door. "Whatever can it be," she wondered. The door handle rattled ominously, and then a little voice said in tones of affliction, "Want to come in. Want to come in." She hastened to open the door, and in marched a little being bearing on his sturdy shoulders such a mass of golden hair that Mrs. Brand impetuously exclaimed: "Why, you lovely yellow chrysanthemum, where did you come from?" But the small person surveyed her resentfully, and proceeded to pucker up his lips in a way that portended many things. He clearly objected to her presence there, and proposed to name her an interloper at the top of his voice. "O come here," she cried desperately. "Do you know I've got two brown kitties on my hat? Did you ever see a brown kitty?" And as she spoke she took off her hat, and placed it alluringly upon her knee whence two little telescoped beasts, with tails that apparently originated in the backs of their necks, gazed enticingly at him. Kitties of so strange a breed must be investigated, and the little boy began a cautious advance. He was a charming baby with his soft hair tossed into sunny clouds around his cherub's face, pink and warm from the effects of a recent nap, and Mrs. Brand in whose mind children were a damp, unpleasant jumble of drooling chins and inadequate jaws, for which Providence had compensated them by a surplusage of lung-power placed at their indiscretion, felt herself affected by a new sensation as she looked at the bonny lad.

"I wonder if these kitties have any teeth? Has yours?"

He nodded his head seriously. "My kitties got spwatchers too," he vouchsafed slowly with bewitching drawl and a pout of his under lip, holding towards her a fat, little fist on which kitty had unmistakably tattooed her trade-mark.

"Oh, my kitties never do such things as that,' said Mrs. Brand feelingly. "You come up here, and sit on my knee, and I will let you hold my hat right in your lap."

This invitation was accepted with dignity, but when he once found himself enthroned with the coveted quadrupeds in his grasp, his infantile doubts vanished, and he poured forth the secrets of his soul with the enchanting candor of childhood.

"Have kitties got fur insides?" he inquired suddenly after he had nearly reduced his hearer to a state of imbecility by his recollections of the Animal Kingdom generally, and Noah's Ark in particular.

"No, I don't think so," replied Mrs. Brand.

"What kind have dey got, den?" he asked, nailing her with his relentless, blue eyes.

"Oh, why,— I don't know, why,— skin insides, I suppose, like yours and mine," she added hastily, conscious that she was being weighed in the balance, and desperately anxious lest she should be found wanting in a clear definition of "insides."

"What color bleed have dey got?"

But this question was easier to dispose of.

"Oh, red bleed," she answered promptly, "just like yours and mine."

"Just like the bleed in your cheek?" he demanded, looking at it skeptically, and proceeding to pinch it experimentally with his pigmy thumb and finger. This was delicious. It was years since she had so unreservedly enjoyed herself.

"Where did you get your chrysanthemum hair?" she inquired presently during a temporary lull in the proceedings.

"From Heaven. But it is going to seed now. I told mamma it would if she didn't cut it soon. The inside of my head is full of hair seeds," he added cheerfully.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Overholt opening the door at this moment, and gazing ruefully at the spectacle before her. "Why, McMichael, how did you ever get in here? I suppose he has bothered you to death, Mrs. Brand."

"No, indeed. We've had a fine time together —haven't we?" She hesitated, and then said: "Would you mind my calling him Chrysanthemum? When he brought his head in I couldn't call him anything else."

Mrs. Overholt did mind a great deal, being very proud of her patronymic, but she smothered her preference for the good of the cause, and said with patient sweetness: "Oh, no; it is all right.

We are very proud of his name, McMichael. If he should ever settle in the East where my family is known it would be a passport for him."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Mrs. Brand vaguely, wondering why people would seek to propitiate remote contingencies at such a sacrifice. McMichael Overholt!

Chrysanthemum took rather a tearful farewell of his new friend, and was only consoled by the promise of a drive with the pony.

"Such a dear, little pony!" said Mrs. Brand.

"Has he got a tail?"

"Yes, I think he's nearly all tail."

"And four legs?"

"Yes."

"And can I whip him all I want to?"

"Oh, yes, I think so."

"And den will he wun away?" he wound up in glee at the hope of such a climax.

Mrs. Brand's growing intimacy with the minister's family was a great source of satisfaction to her husband. He had often been forced to admit to himself that her little witticisms at the expense of Dr. and Mrs. Marvin had not been without warrant, and he felt it a most encouraging sign that she listened attentively to the sermons of this pastor, and made no remarks about them whatever. Mr. Overholt's reputation as an orator was already having so marked an effect upon the church attendance that Mrs. Crumpet was forced sadly to admit having never expected in her time "to see the Church of the Pilgrim Fathers become the resort of the rabble." The gospel according to Sister Crumpet did not contemplate the adoption as a working theory of any such risky utterances as, "I was a stranger and ye took me in," and she endured bitter pangs at the invasion of the pew that had always been sacred to her substantial person.

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Brand stood in the rounding alcove of her sitting-room, looking idly out upon the storm that whistled icily against the windows. How dull it was to be shut up alone all day! As it was necessary for a full-grown woman to have some occupation other than twirling her thumbs, she had set herself to the writing of a long-delayed letter. She had committed herself to the address, but the date? That puzzled her, and she had retreated to the window to consult the elements about it when she discerned the dim figure of a man fighting his way slowly up the street.

The color deepened in her cheeks, but she was writing at high pressure when Dr. Challoner entered after his usual prefatory tap. He sat down, stretching himself out in the easy chair with a sigh of contentment. "Make yourself at home, Bruin," said Mrs. Brand kindly.

Early in their acquaintance she had dubbed him

"Bruin." "Don't you know," she said, "there are certain perfumes associated in our minds with people and experiences long since passed and gone, the faintest whiff of which will bring the past back so vividly that for the moment we forget the present? I feel just that way about you. Your tread is suggestive. I never hear you coming without thinking of the forest primeval, and the airy grace of the mastodon and megatherium. There is something positively artistic in the way you preserve your atmosphere against the assaults of time. But we'll compromise on 'Bruin.'"

For he was a great six-foot athlete with a tendency to dispose his person promiscuously in places manifestly not intended for it. One never thought of his looks, which was a pity, perhaps, for even in their immaturity they were full of promise for the time when beauty of features should have become dependent upon beauty of character.

"Well, what is it now?" suggested Mrs. Brand, as the doctor seemed content to sit silently, his gray eyes fixed upon her with a concentrated stare which threatened to become monotonous.

"One would think I was a new kind of microbe."

Dr. Challoner laughed. "I wasn't even thinking about you."

"Oh, Bruin!" She sighed. "You're too candid."

"Fortunately not all your friends are open to that accusation. Mr. Overholt, for instance." Dr. Challoner gazed impersonally at the fire. A little ripple of laughter greeted his remark.

"Now, Bruin, you're jealous."

"Oh, I grant you there's nothing subtle about me. I'll just tell you what I think about that fellow. He's an everlasting fraud, that's what he is."

"I've seen this accumulating for a long time," said Mrs. Brand.

"You have!" he exclaimed, with astonishment. "But I've never opened my mouth about the man."

"You didn't need to, Bruin. That's the charm of a sensitive organization like yours. Your opinion of him just dripped from every pore."

"Cecily, you're cruel! It's kind of hard on me that you should be able to kick off my sentiments so neatly, when I can't for the life of me get on the trail of yours."

Mrs. Brand laughed lightly. "That's odd, for I've experienced the same difficulty myself. But you must admit that he's kind."

"Oh, yes."

"And generous."

"Ye-es."

"And handsome."

"Now, there —— "

"Never mind theorizing Bruin, for the case doesn't demand it, and I see that you're prejudiced."

"Hash!"

"And pious."

"That depends upon the meaning you ——"

"Pious, I said. If I had meant good I should have said so."

"Oh, yes, pious."

"And brilliant."

"Yes."

"And a born orator."

"Yes."

"Then, my dear boy, what more can you ask?"

"What more can I ask?" repeated the doctor, gustily. Then he fell into a resentful silence, but when he finally spoke again he startled Mrs. Brand out of her smiling study of him. "That little woman's dying, and a lot he cares!"

"What little woman?" she inquired, sharply.

"Mrs. Overholt. He sent word yesterday that he would like me to call. I wondered a good deal, but of course it was my business to go, and I went. It appears he's been consulting some quack down town about her, so that if there ever was a chance to save her it's gone now."

"Oh, but nonsense, Bruin. I haven't seen her for a week, but she was so bright then."

"I dare say," he replied indifferently. "As soon as I found out how immediately serious her condition was I told him I should like to meet Dr. Bradbury in consultation. I even intimated that I was surprised at his not having called Dr. Bradbury in the first place — a member of his own church. He just looked me up and down, and said coolly, 'Will you kindly allow me a preference in the matter? I did not call you in to undertake Mrs. Overholt's case without entire confidence in your ability, and I do not think we need to quarrel, because I intend to believe in her recovery. '

"It is her lungs, you know. I told him plainly at last that I saw no prospects of her living more than a few weeks unless a miracle was wrought. He smiled quite pleasantly, and said he had never found the acceptance of miracles a stumbling-block. I tell you it was queer."

"I don't think you understand him altogether."

"No, I guess I don't!" retorted Dr. Challoner, explosively.

"He has a very hopeful disposition, and of course he wants to believe the best. But how — why, he was here last night." Mrs. Brand broke off suddenly. "And he never said a word about this, not even when I inquired for Mrs. Overholt." She looked at the doctor in perplexity. "And he was here so long!"

"I don't suppose there is anything particularly exhilarating in the society of a sick wife."

"But I am appalled," said Mrs. Brand, in real distress. "Poor little Chrys! Whatever will they do? Oh, Bruin, you must be mistaken."

"No, I'm not. It's just one of those wild fire cases that don't give science any show."

They discussed the matter for a while, and then Dr. Challoner said, as he stood waiting to go, "'Tisn't fair, is it? I come in here and reveal all the family secrets of the O'Flahertys and Nemeceks because they live on Moon Street, but I have felt the greatest compunctions at talking about the Overholts."

"Well, you needn't worry. I could tell you a great many more and stranger things about Eugene Overholt than you will ever be able to tell me." In the very instance of speaking Mrs. Brand winced at the indiscretion which let slip so dangerous a boomerang as that remark might prove. But Arthur was notedly unobservant, and would probably never recall it. And he did not until he was half way to the city.

Dr. Challoner's mother had been left a widow when the boy was about fifteen years old with just sufficient means to equip him thoroughly for the profession he elected to follow. That she should die before his return from abroad seemed a cruel dispensation, but her impetuous spirit would have chafed sorely under the years of apprenticeship to obscurity, which he must serve before he should climb the heights of fame on which she already saw him fixed. Between the young man and Mr. Brand there was no closer tie than the fact that the first Mrs. Brand and his mother had been sisters, which was, moreover, a stronger bond than either of them realized, for around the memory of his early experiences there had crystallized all the genuinely tender sentiment the millionaire had ever known. It was not strange that the young man, bereaved, and hesitant on the verge of an unknown future, should feel somewhat disconcerted at finding that his uncle's grave old house, which for all the years that he could remember had been subject to the rectangular sway of a staid housekeeper, had undergone a startling transformation. That his uncle should marry did not appear to him out of the way, but that he should marry as he had was decidedly so. But contrary to his forebodings he and his "Aunt Cecily" soon became fast friends. "How could I help liking you?" she said to him afterwards, "when you were so evidently over-come by my charms. Do you remember that first breakfast when you pressed me to try a few fried potatoes on my porridge? It was such a relief to the situation."

At no period of his career could the friendship of a clever woman have been as valuable to him as it was just then. To be sure, he did not recognize the extent or the quality of Mrs. Brand's influence upon him. Nor was she capable of an adequate analysis of the delicate complexities of a character at whose apparent simplicity she sometimes laughed. But she criticized him more judicially than a sister might have done, and her admiration for him, while less saccharine than a sweetheart's, was happily more discriminating. As for Mr. Brand, he was probably destined to go to his grave without realizing how largely the tenor of his way owed its evenness to his nephew, who had come into his wife's life at a time when the dignity of her position had lost its savor and when she was growing perilously conscious of increasing reservations regarding her husband and her relations to him. In the companionship of a spirit young and enthusiastic like her own she found relief from the pressure of unwelcome thoughts. They discussed each new experience with the ardor of amateurs, and Mr. Brand sanely rejoiced that his wife had found an outlet for enthusiasms with which he was not contemporary.

For the first few months after his return from abroad Dr. Challoner had remained at the Brands', his uncle being anxious that he should take root in Glenedge. And no doubt, he could in time have filched a practice from the misfortunes of physicians who permitted their patients to put on a premature immortality, or went so far as to mistake Mrs. Maule's alarming symptoms for those of common hysterics, the sequel of sundry remarks of her husband on the subject of sealskin coats and spring bonnets. From a desire to be dutiful, the young man patiently sampled the situation for a while, and then broke loose from it with a gasp of relief, and went deliberately down into the maelstrom of sin and suffering from which he felt his call. And he had ever since exulted in his choice. That was three or four years ago, and now at thirty-two he felt himself rich in experience, and strong in his grasp of convictions hitherto dimly apprehended. At first Mr. Brand had been disgusted with the whole proceeding, but as time went on he saw clearly that "the boy" had gauged his mission well, and that he had in him, moreover, the stuff from which a hero springs. And there were times when the old man swelled with pride which he would not have admitted even to himself.

Two or three times a week Dr. Challoner would come tumbling in upon Mrs. Brand, sometimes with a tempest at his tongue's end and fury in his eye. Then he would begin to apostrophize her "like Demosthenes before he wore a pebble," she told him once. "Why do you stutter and stamp at me? I'm not the chosen figurehead of all the corporations and cruelties in the world. Go home at once, or no, better still, sit down here and write out that man's story exactly as you have told it to me. Don't write an article. Nobody cares a pin for you or your theories."

"That's just like a woman," he growled. "Totally unable to contemplate the abstract."

"Women and editors, Bruin," she retorted unmoved.

The next day she always carried or sent the manuscript down to the editor of one of the great dailies, he being a personal friend of her husband's, and had the satisfaction of seeing it immediately in print.

"That's like their cheek!" said the doctor when she showed it to him in triumph. "They've cut out the best parts of it."

She smiled a good deal to herself about that, but she soothed his anathemas with the innocence of an infant dove. After the acceptance of one of these stories Dr. Challoner was amazed at receiving a request for a series of six such studies to be published under the title of "Snap-shots in the Slums." The title was something of a shock to a nature unjournalistic in its bent, but he submitted to it for the sake of the cause he had made his, and from time to time these pathetic sketches appeared and made a place for themselves in the minds of thoughtful men.

Directly after breakfast the morning following Dr. Challoner's visit, Mrs. Brand hurried to the parsonsage where the minister and his family had been comfortably installed some weeks before.

Her sympathy for them all swept her manner free from embarrassment as she explained her errand to Mr. Overholt.

"I thought perhaps I could help you in some way, for my heart aches for your wife and poor little Chrys," she concluded simply.

"And me?" he inquired bending towards her with a smile that carried with it so little suggestion of foreboding that she stared at him blankly. But a moment later she flushed with mortification, for his next remark seemed to imply a rebuke that she felt her manner must have courted.

"I know that you," he said gravely, "can understand from what Dr. Challoner told you what a burden of anxiety I am carrying just now, and how difficult it is to remember that I have no right to cast the shadow of my personal sorrow over my people."

"Oh, I know it must be terrible for you," she said impetuously. "You must let me be all the help I can to you. Isn't there anything I could do for Mrs. Overholt this morning?"

"Perhaps she would like to see you. I will go and find out how she feels."

A faint smile flickered across his face as he went up-stairs. But there was no sign of it when he came down again, saying that Mrs. Overholt would be so glad if Mrs. Brand cared to come up.

It was a wan, little face that looked up from the pillows at the tall and radiant woman beside the bed. The dainty Dresden China Shepherdess effect was all gone; in the wide eyes there was that wistful plea for sympathy that one sees sometimes in the eyes of a hurt animal. Mrs. Brand was shocked at the change in the little woman, and dropping on her knees beside her, she took the transparent bits of hands in her own so firm and warm.

"Why, my dear," she said in her round, rich voice, "whatever do you mean by acting like this? You needn't suppose that we're going to let you put on airs and graces and lie here at your ease when all the rest of the world has to be up and doing."

"Yes, I'll soon be better. I don't know why Dr. Challoner won't let me get up."

"Oh, that's because it's been such horrible, blustery weather."

On the other side of the bed stood Mr. Overholt, a silent watcher of the scene before him. The scant figure of his little wife, her pallid face with its sharpened outlines, what a background it gave to the curve and color of the woman bending over her!

It may have been the irritating sense of those cool, blue eyes upon her or something subtler that made Mrs. Brand say sharply, "Go back to your sermon, please. We women want a chance to be foolish if we choose, and we can't if you stand there taking impressions of us."

Mr. Overholt shrugged his shoulders. When he reached his study he lighted a cigar, and kicked over his waste-paper basket.

"Confound her impudence!" he ejaculated, and felt relief.

"Yonfound her imp'ness!" repeated a little voice behind him.

He whirled round on his chair, and there in the corner sat McMichael composedly fitting a garment of the Mother Hubbard species to his sailor doll.

"Yonfound her imp'ness!" reiterated the child, apparently enamored of the phrase and anxious to commit it to memory.

"Confound you for an omnipresent imp!" said his father laughing. "What are you always turning up for like a bad penny?"

"'Cause Hilda fell into the oven," replied McMichael with the air of one possessed of a grievance.

"Because you pushed her in, you mean, and she sent you up here in the hopes of escaping with her life. Now you must be a very good boy and not speak while Papa writes his sermon."

Mr. Overholt's homiletical ardors did not, however, prevent his hearing, after a while, the light opening and shutting of his wife's door, and in an instant he was on the landing.

"Mrs. Brand, I should like a moment if you can spare it," he said gently.

She hesitated. But at that moment McMichael added himself to the proceedings, and precipitating himself upon her with a welcome for which she was not primed, she capitulated, and sat down in the chair that Mr. Overholt drew forward for her. The little lad climbed confidently upon her lap, and promptly began a search for hidden treasure.

"Well, Chrys, what thoughts that are dark and tricks that are vain are distracting your corrugated little head just now?"

"Want your tick-clock," he replied, sturdily. And then, with a change of tone that was simply glaring in its manifest design, he said lugubriously, "I had a headache in my toof the day after to-morrow."

Of course they laughed, and of course the watch came forth, and McMichael forgot alike his wiles and his woes. Then Mrs. Brand turned to Mr. Overholt and began to speak of his wife.

"I know so little about illness that I cannot be a fair judge, but it would seem to me most alarming that she has lost ground so suddenly."

"Yes, that is true. But she has been ill so many times since our marriage, quite as seriously as now, though not in the same way."

She found him just as Dr. Challoner had described, calm and confident in his own opinion, and quite indifferent about any other. She felt suddenly foolish and out of place, as she had nothing but sympathy to offer, and it was apparently uncalled for.

"Come, Chrys," she said to the child cuddling against her, "you must let me go now." Her heart was full of a dim sense of outrage, and she could not know how abrupt to the little boy was his descent from Paradise. He went slowly back to his corner, and sat down on his dolly with a bump, that was ruin to the one and mortification to the other. It was too much. With a wail he broke forth, "Oh, I so lonely! I so lonely all by I-self."

In an instant Mrs. Brand was beside him. "Why, you poor mite!" she exclaimed. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Wipe my tears," he said, pitifully, and she humbly mopped up the flood of which she felt herself to be the bitter spring. Then she stood up again, his little hand tightly clasping hers, but she felt perplexed. Poor little Chrys! He looked neglected — yes, dirty; not at all as his dainty little mother kept him. All at once there came to her an inspiration.

"Mr. Overholt, I wonder — I don't know

whether you would like it, but suppose you let me take Chrys home with me and keep him for a while. I really don't see how you can manage with him just now."

"How kind of you," said Mr. Overholt, gratefully. "But you would find him an awful pest. And yet it would be a relief to me to know that he was happy and properly cared for. I really am driven to death," he continued with a sigh, and Mrs. Brand noticed with remorse how haggard and drawn he looked just then. "Dr. Challoner is to send us a nurse to-day, and perhaps after this I shall not have such broken nights. But even then, with my sermons to prepare for the inevitable Sunday, and a couple of lectures pressing, and the everlasting jangle of the door-bell, with its unexpected demands upon my time — oh! it's enough to drive a man mad."

"I don't see how you stand it at all."

"And my poor wife, lying wearily hour after hour alone, wondering why I don't come and talk to her."

"That must be the hardest thing of all," exclaimed Mrs. Brand, with quick pity for them both. This little glimpse behind the scenes was strong in its appeal to her sympathies, for she had never thought of the penalties attached to popularity; that the acquiring of a reputation should carry with it the sting that one should never fall below it became suddenly clear to her, and her heart softened towards the man whose audiences swayed beneath his eloquence.

"Yonfound her imp'ness!" chanted McMichael, seeing an opportunity to stop a conversational gap to his own glory. "Papa said that," he continued, from a kindly desire to enlighten his friend.

Mrs. Brand looked at Mr. Overholt in momentary embarrassment, and then her lips twitched with comprehension. "Oh, that's charming!" she exclaimed in a burst of laughter, in which McMichael and his victim joined. "Come away, child," she said, tragically. "You'll ruin your father's reputation. Just think if I had been Mrs. Crumpet!"

CHAPTER V

In the agitated weeks that followed her first meeting with her old lover, Mrs. Brand left far behind her the placid sequences of a life that had often oppressed her. The convictions which a few months before had been so neatly arranged in her mind, loomed up before her now in a jumble of contradictions. She realized dimly that she could no longer define Mr. Overholt and her attitude towards him, and her consciousness of this was weighted with a vague alarm. Her position and his in relation to each other she did not think incomprehensible, but what was it in the man himself that provoked her to incessant surmise? Now, there was Arthur — the thought of him brought a smile to her tense lips. "Oh, yes, he's just as good — " Good? Why was that the very last word she would ever choose to describe the other man. For he glowed with the enthusiasm of faith, and she had felt herself unwillingly thrilled by his power in presenting "their side of the question." She knew pretty well where Arthur stood on religious matters, though he rarely touched upon them, and his position she considered a kind of weak-kneed compromise. "Character" and "Duty" were cold-blooded terms and contrasted ill as a gospel with one of glowing imagery and dramatic emotion. Character — it was a mere matter of environment, and duty was simply some other person's ideal coercively applied to his neighbor. Her lips curled as her mind dwelt in pungent reminiscences upon the days when she had worn the yoke of Aunt Lavinia.

Chrys was duly installed a member of the Brand household, and speedily won from it a deference to his lightest wish, which its master characterized as "preposterous." "Can't he sleep with Jane?" he inquired, protesting against the intrusion into his dressing-room of a little white bed.

"Certainly not!" replied his wife, severely. "I'm responsible for him, and must have him near me."

"Going to sit up nights beside him, I suppose," said Mr. Brand, grimly.

Chrys unconsciously plied all his sweetest arts upon this distinguished foe, for whom he seemed to feel an especial admiration. One morning he climbed out of his little crib, and, pattering coldly across the floor, he leaned over and softly kissed the old man's cheek. Mr. Brand started as if he had been stung, and, staring angrily at the diminutive figure beside him, he growled out, "What under the canopy do you want now?"

"I will get into bed with you if you like," replied Chrys, sweetly, as one conferring a favor.

"But I don't like," retorted Mr. Brand, emphatically, still smarting from the touch of those soft lips.

"Then you're a beastly man!" exclaimed the outraged child, as he retired precipitately to his own nest, where Mrs. Brand found him sobbing quietly when she came in from her dressing-room.

"Whatever can have happened?" she said wonderingly to her husband, who vouchsafed no explanation, being seized with sudden fright as to the light in which his conduct might be viewed.

But he carried with him to business that morning a vague sense of discomfort, which harried him through the long day, and which he vainly sought to smother by dwelling on the alarming depravity of so young a child. " Dreadful language for such a little boy. Why, when I was a boy —— " And it was no doubt the soothing contrast afforded by his own record that prompted him on his way home that evening to pause suddenly in front of a frivolous looking store and plunge in quickly with the furtive air of an escaping criminal. " Give me the best five-pound box of candy you've got," he said, guiltily. But when the girl presented it for his inspection he was not satisfied, and she found him so hard to please that when he finally departed she said to the girl next to her, " There goes an old man bound to get his money's worth." But she was wrong that time. He had simply been trying to see that box of candy through the eyes of a little child, and it is a serious thing to have one's reputation subject to the limits of a few square inches. " Perhaps he won't come near me," he thought, apprehensively, as his big house loomed up before him. But there was no room yet in Chrys' wholesome, little heart for the cherishing of a grudge. Dr. Challoner had dropped in for dinner, as he occasionally did, and the child looked up eagerly from his seat upon the doctor's knee to shout in his piercing treble as Mr. Brand came into the sitting-room, "Oh, Uncle Brand, do you know we are going to have scarlet roosters for dessert? I saw Jane taking them out of a white box."

"Charlotte russe," laughed Mrs. Brand.

"Well, McMichael," said Mr. Brand, desperately grasping at an opportunity which must not be let slip, "go into the hall and see if there isn't another white box out there."

The child slipped down and did as he was bid, bringing back the parcel with him.

"Now you may sit down and open it," said Mr. Brand, conscious of a wild anxiety lest his offering should pale in attractiveness beside the "Scarlet Roosters."

It took a long while for the little fingers to do the work, but at last the wrapping fell off, and as the bright, pretty box came into view, Mrs. Brand and the doctor glanced at each other with amusement. For Mr. Brand, deserved as was his reputation for large-handed generosity, was singularly opposed to those trivial but precious expressions of good will that are the small change of friendship. "If I need anything I can buy it," he would say. "And what I don't need I don't want anybody else to buy for me" — which would be sensible, indeed, if hearts were heads.

In the meantime Chrys stood regarding the box in an ecstasy too great for utterance. His little mother, in spite of her mental limitations, or perhaps because of them, had clung with astonishing tenacity to a few basic truths about the training of children, with the result that the child had not had the sensations of a century crammed into his four short years, and would willingly have sold himself for a lollypop, with tender qualms of conscience at his bargain.

"Take off the cover," said Mr. Brand, beginning to find more enjoyment in the little scene than he could have believed possible.

The child tipped it off slowly, and then with but a glance at the sweetness within he replaced it firmly, and walked with a Napoleonic air to the farthest corner of the room, where he seated himself flat upon the floor, and apparently became lost in a minutely critical study of the carpet. Mr. Brand looked the image of despair, and would have spoken had not his wife laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"Let him alone, or you'll spoil it all."

Since when had she become an authority on the subject of children and their humors? Mr. Brand was tired, and he leaned back in his chair looking through half-closed eyes at his wife. How different she was lately. Only the other night he had heard her voice mingling with the lisping tones of Chrys' evening prayer, a thing almost incredible. "A little child shall lead them" came into his mind, accustomed as he was to the clothing of his emotions in scriptural phraseology, and then a strange thought pierced him like an arrow — could it be that he had not altogether understood her?

"There, now," exclaimed Mrs. Brand, softly. For the child, with averted eyes and a delicious affectation of unconsciousness, was drawing steadily nearer to the treasure which was filling his little being with ecstasy.

He would not even steal a glance at the box, but his fingers crept unerringly across the table until they rested upon the lid again. Only for a moment, however, and then he tiptoed elaborately back to his corner, but not to sit down this time. He stood there clasping and unclasping his hands in a frenzy of foretaste from which he must wring every drop of nectar, and then he looked at the table. It was fatal. With one leap he had spanned the gulf between, and, tearing the cover off with ruthless clutch, he seized the biggest, pinkest candy, and then, turning to Mr. Brand, he said in a voice in which hope plainly fought with fear, "For me?"

Mr. Brand nodded. A burden had rolled off his soul, and henceforth there was established between himself and Chrys an *entente cordiale* in which the old man found the keenest satisfaction.

Mr. Overholt came in nearly every day to see his boy, and the exquisite affection that existed between them was the one thing that Mrs. Brand felt free to admire about the minister without any harassing checks. As a friend — no, he never could be any woman's friend; as a lover — ah! she no longer dwelt upon her memories of him in that capacity. He persisted in speaking of himself as her pastor, a little joke that they both found droll, but which brought real comfort to Mr. Brand. For the old man's anxiety about her was growing upon him. He, himself, had failed, but surely this man, with his brilliant way of stating truths so precious and imperative, surely he could influence her to those experiences against which she had hitherto rigidly set herself. So he was always glad to see the minister come in — never dull, and full of interest in people and events; essentially a man of the world in his beliefs as in his tailoring. "There's nothing visionary about that fellow," Mr. Brand remarked with complacency. "He knows as much about stocks and bonds as I do myself. It's too bad that such a business man was spoilt for the making of a preacher. But I guess our church don't need to fret about that." For the opinions of Mesdames Crumpet, Wigley and Gasch and sundry of that ilk were certainly not shared by the crowding congregations, who testified to their enthusiasm by that unheard-of thing, a surplus in the ecclesiastical treasury. A year ago Mr. Overholt could have desired no keener triumph, but now that he held it in his grasp his cup was not full. His salary of four thousand dollars, which had seemed in prospect princely, developed in retrospect a deplorable lack of "staying" qualities. The minister affected patrician tastes, and secretly scorned economy as a species of indecency. To tip an obsequious waiter until the man's servile spine bent low before him was a practical interpretation of the little text, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," which filled him with spiritual exaltation.

The Brand mansion had become to him a kind of temple in which were enshrined those ideals of success which he never preached about, but just worshiped. Mr. Brand himself was a gilt-edged vision of what a man might be if — if he only could. And Mrs. Brand, with her proud detachment from a vulgar world, inspired in him an admiration which was not prompted in the least by any sentimental regret for the past, for he realized with admirable appreciation of things human in general and of himself and Mrs. Brand in particular, that as his wife she could never have possessed for him the fascinations which he found so potent in their sway of him now. " Her environment fits her like a glove," he thought in complacent approval of a result for which he surely deserved the credit. For if he had followed her up with the celerity she had evidently expected, how pitiful would have been the contrast. " She's twenty-eight. If I had married her she'd have been sour enough by this time." Which he did not mean at all as a reflection upon himself. As to the dangers of his growing intimacy with her — there weren't any, for he had never known a woman who was so little of a fool. He had no fear of her making him the repository of her marital woes, which was the unfortunate way some women had of flirting by inference, as it were. There were methods less involved. He had been afraid at first, but that had been for want of data on the subject. Speaking broadly, Mrs. Brand was a good woman, and what was more to the purpose, she was undoubtedly a wise one. So he felt comfortably sure of himself in a situation about which he had few illusions.

"Never mind me, Jane," he said one afternoon to the maid who opened the door in response to his ring, "I will announce myself."

It was one of those warm days, sweet with the soft airs of the coming spring, when the world in spite of bare branches and the brown earth sets winter at defiance on its own ground. Through the open doors there floated out to Mr. Overholt the sound of the piano, and he stepped lightly through the wide, beautiful hall in pursuit of its rippling melody.

Mrs. Brand was seated at the piano, sweeping the key-board with glancing fingers. It was one of those moments when she forgot the environment that Mr. Overholt admired so much, one of those blessed moments when she wandered far out upon the wings of her song into those dim regions where fact pales before fancy, and where vision takes precedence of prophecy. At last she paused with a little sigh, but only to glide into a lullaby, as light and sweet as a baby's breath.

The sun streamed in, a golden shaft of light, through an amber panel of glass above her head, and it was, perhaps, small wonder that Mr. Overholt, standing between the portieres in patient endurance of the music, felt himself repaid by the picture at which he gazed. He could not see Mrs. Brand's face, but the charming pose of her figure in a soft gown of russet hue with a deep fichu of creamy lace falling away from her throat, left nothing further to be desired. The lingering notes of the lullaby died away into the baby's dreams, and Mrs. Brand sat still, her hands idly clasped in her lap.

"Mrs. Brand!"

She turned sharply around, but when she saw her visitor she did not offer him the slightest welcome. He had frightened her dreadfully, and she hated to be frightened.

"Oh, how sorry I am! Did I startle you?" asked Mr. Overholt, coming towards her with a smile in his eyes.

But the intuition upon which he prided himself had played him false this time, for Mrs. Brand was in what he later described to himself as a "tip-towering rage."

"Who opened the door to you?" she inquired with the edges of her lips.

"Why, Jane opened it to me, as usual," he answered, bravely enough. This was a ridiculous way for a woman to act.

Mrs. Brand stepped across the room and touched a bell, in answer to which the maid presented herself.

"Will you kindly remember in the future that it is your business to show my visitors into the reception-room?"

The flustered maid retired in a condition of stuttering apology, only to find the bell ready for her with another ring.

But it was Mr. Overholt who stood next to it this time, and when she appeared he said kindly, "I am sorry that I should have got you into trouble, Jane. Will you show me to the reception-room?" And he followed her without a glance at Mrs. Brand. Once there he took out his card, and said gravely, "Take that to your mistress," and Jane retired again with an indistinct but none the less unhappy conception of herself as a sort of human shuttlecock.

Mrs. Brand sat still for a few minutes and studied the visiting card with an interesting variety of feelings. She even laughed a little. But one thing was clear — to that reception-room she must go, and she finally went after she had braced and buttressed her position as well as she could. Mr. Overholt had presumed unpardonably; there could be no two opinions about that. But face to face with him again, her preparations to meet him seemed ludicrous. She felt as if she had been walking on stilts which had suddenly been knocked from under her.

" My wife has been worrying herself about McMichael's clothes, and nothing would do but that I must come in and find out from you if anything was wanted for him."

Could anything be more levelling to one's " high horse " than this? She looked for some gleam or twinkle of mirth, but the even blue of Mr. Overholt's eyes betrayed no sign whatever. He proceeded to a discussion of Chrys's wardrobe, brief and technical, and then went away without the slightest hint of an apology for his outrageous conduct, having managed, indeed, to impress upon Mrs. Brand that it was she who was in error. This was intolerable, and she lay in wait for him with elaborate schemes for his undoing, that would no doubt have succeeded if Mr. Overholt had been without schemes of his own. But he had never been made so thoroughly angry by any woman before, and he proposed that she should purchase her pardon at his own price. And so a week elapsed before she saw him again at all, and then only for a few moments one evening, during which she sat silent on the edge of a conversation from which she was clearly excluded. Then another week went by without the tête-à-tête for which she perversely planned whenever she got a glimpse of him. She went to the parsonage every few days to see Mrs. Overholt, but except on one occasion, when he left the room immediately upon her entrance with the briefest possible greeting of her, his home was as unproductive of his presence as a potato-patch might have been. Then she spent hours in convincing herself that she "didn't care," and Dr. Challoner, who was in and out, as usual, was generally made the victim of this indifference. Oh, how dull he was, with his work and his people! She fairly detested the whole thing, and told him so in unmeasured terms.

"Well, hang it all!" he exclaimed, desperately. "What do you go enticing a fellow around here for if you don't want to hear what he's got to say?" Whereupon he promptly received another volley of invective; it was such a relief to be able to say all one wanted to without fear of unnatural consequences.

But this state of things must not go on. It was ridiculous, and she would put an end to it. That was why she went with her husband to prayer-meeting, a thing whereat his soul rejoiced and took fresh courage for her salvation. After that, indeed, it would not have stunned him had she led the prayers of the church. But one must be patient, and not seek to involve the spirit in undue precipitation.

At the close of the meeting Mr. Brand left her to wait for him while he lingered here and there discussing ecclesiastical business with one and another. She sat still, feeling herself curiously foreign to these people with a language and experience of which she felt proud to be ignorant. She followed Mr. Overholt with her eyes as long as she could, and then reflected that his hat and coat were still there, and any way he always walked home with Mr. Brand. At last he started up the aisle, but two or three women palpitated round him, and he stopped to talk to them beside the seat on which Mrs. Brand was sitting. What would she do if he went by her without speaking! But he did not. When he had dismissed those odious women with their grins and giggles, he stepped into the seat in front, and, leaning over it, held out his hand with a manner from which all the warmth and spontaneity had departed, saying, "Ah, good evening, Mrs. Brand. How is my boy to-day?"

"Just as he always is — the sweetest child in the world." That was not at all what she ought to have said, and she felt angry at the impulse that had tipped her tongue with so nice an utterance.

"How kind you are!" And then he straightened himself to move on.

"When are you coming to see us again? I shall be at home to-morrow afternoon." She found it harder than she had thought to infuse a casual air into an invitation so direct.

Before replying, Mr. Overholt looked at her, a faint smile chafing the corners of his mouth. Above her velvet and furs her flushed, downcast face appealed to him with the sense of a newfound charm. But he was greedy of conquest, and her attitude piqued him to a further trial of his resources.

"Will you, indeed? That is too bad. I believe I have an engagement of some kind myself." And he turned lightly on his heel to greet the importunity of a badged and buttoned young woman, who appeared to be the president of a set of initials who were causing her deep distress on account of their lack of spirituality, "if the Y. E. L. P.'s go sleigh-riding on prayer-meeting night."

"It's shocking," said Mr. Overholt. "But I really think you can handle that much better than I can. It needs some one with great tact."

He walked home with Mr. and Mrs. Brand. She was invisible on the further arm of her husband, and if she said good-night when they separated he was not aware of it.

But whatever his intentions might have been in regard to calling upon her, Mr. Overholt found himself inquiring for Mrs. Brand shortly after two o'clock on the following afternoon. He waited in the reception-room a few minutes, and then the maid reappeared to ask him to follow her to Mrs. Brand's sitting-room.

"You must excuse my receiving you here. I was asleep when you came, and really not a fit object for the reception-room." She looked at the tumbled pillows on the divan at the foot of which she still sat. One cheek was pink and warm where it had pressed the cushion, the other quite pale, and she spoke with the uncertain utterance of one who still lingers on the borderland of dreams.

"I am sorry that you were disturbed for me," said Mr. Overholt, seriously. "Where is McMichael?"

"He's gone out with Richard, and I have no doubt he is trying to beat Curly bald. I heard him this morning confidently inquiring of Mr. Brand why he had rubbed so much hair off the top of his head."

"Yes, he's awful," admitted Mr. Overholt. But not there to discuss Chrys and his doings, he sat silent after his remark, looking at Mrs. Brand with a cool persistence which she felt rather than saw. From sheer nervousness she rose and crossed the room, taking an easy chair near to him. It would certainly be easier to endure a two-foot stare than one of ten feet.

"How is Mrs. Overholt to-day?"

But Mr. Overholt did not reply to this question. He simply continued to look at her.

"Oh, mercy!" she broke out, desperately, "can't you speak?"

"Yes," he answered, quickly. "Are you sorry?"

"Sorry!" she exclaimed. "Sorry, indeed! Sorry for what?"

"Because you were so cross."

"Oh, how can you talk so!" she said, sitting up straight and defiant on her chair. "You presumed outrageously ——"

"Of course," he said, lightly. Then, with a quick change of tone as he bent towards her, "that is, if it had been any other woman but yourself. But do you think it possible to regulate things between you and me as if we were ordinary friends or acquaintances?"

"Why not?"

He waited a moment, and then said, bitterly, "You can be a very cruel woman when you choose."

Mrs. Brand threw her head against the back of her chair with an impatient sigh. She had on a white gown scattered all over with violets, and by a pretty conceit the subtle perfume of the dainty flowers themselves betrayed itself about her.

Mr. Overholt got up to go. "I'm sorry I can't see the boy. I think he had better come over to see his mother to-morrow, perhaps."

Mrs. Brand looked up at him. "Don't go," she said, softly.

"Why should I stay?" He was not a graven image, and the rise and fall of her tremulous breath, the appeal in her dark eyes were influences of the most potent sort to him. He sat down again, drawing his chair so close to hers that she felt a vague alarm.

"I don't know what you want," she said, restlessly. "Are you to be allowed to break in upon me whenever you choose?"

"Now you're foolish." He paused a moment. "Do you suppose Challoner would have waited in the reception-room until he was formally announced the other day?"

"But that's different," she said, quickly. "He's Mr. Brand's nephew."

"Ah! I'm glad that the relationship carries so much weight with you."

Mrs. Brand flushed but did not speak.

"No, indeed, I was not going to wait with a partition between me and the sound of your fingers when, by a bold coup — *de pied*, shall I say? — I could get inside the gates of Paradise." He smiled at her with the singular sweetness of expression which she found so irresistible in his child. "And I didn't care a straw for your fury.

I think I would have been willing to pin you alive to the canvas of time if I could have secured the immortality of the picture. I never could understand how people could collect sheets of pin-stuck moths and things but if they felt they were perpetuating beauty in those wings and crawls, I think I sympathize with them. But I needn't regret the loss of that picture now," he continued, his eyes dwelling on her suggestively.

"Oh, spare me!" she exclaimed, putting up her hands defensively.

"Ah! now you're becoming morbidly self-conscious," he said, regretfully. "And that is fatal to art."

A little silence fell between them, each feeling, perhaps, the pressure of thoughts which it was well not to utter. But some echo of Mrs. Brand's was surely in the question which forced itself at length to the surface.

"Do you know," she said, slowly, "I have often wondered whatever induced you to become a minister?"

"You don't mean it! Might I venture to inquire if there is an implied criticism beneath that innocent wonder of yours?"

Mrs. Brand felt uncomfortable.

"Because if there is," continued Mr. Overholt, looking at her steadily as he tugged at the ends of his moustache, "it may be well to remind you that no one can possibly realize more keenly than I do myself how many are my shortcomings in a calling which I consider the noblest of them all." He pushed his chair back.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" cried Mrs. Brand, penitently, holding out her hand towards him.

For an instant he looked at it indifferently. Then he took it between his own with a quiet deliberation that frightened her. But she would have despised a struggle to free it, and it lay there fluttering while her face grew pale.

"Look at me," he said, almost in a whisper.

"Don't!"

"Look at me," he repeated insistently.

She was like an entranced victim, as powerless to quell the tumult within as to resist the compulsion without. She slowly turned her averted eyes towards him.

"Do you think," he began, rapidly, scorching her with the glow in his eyes, "that it argues nothing for me that I can sit here with your hand in mine" — he held it in a grip from which there was no escape, while he caressed it tenderly with the fingers which were free — "that I can look into your eyes as no other man has ever done, that I can suffer the intoxication of your nearness to me, remembering all that might be, and yet not turn a deaf ear to the voice of duty in my soul?" His voice sank until she hardly caught his words. Never in her life before had she felt the fierce flow of such a tide as swept madly through her veins just now. She leaned her head helplessly back against her chair and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER VI

Mrs. Brand and Chrys were idling in the warmth of the garden. She had been amusing him by planting some seeds in a little nook which he had appropriated as his own, where his "bee-biscus" and his "Jackanese hop" were objects of so tender a solicitude on his part as to threaten their very existence. As he galloped hither and thither on an imaginary steed of most uncertain temper, after his horticultural ardor had spent itself, he ran into Jane coming across the lawn with a note for Mrs. Brand. It was just a few words from Mr. Overholt, scribbled hastily on a half-sheet of paper.

"Can you bring McMichael over to see his mother at once?" But Mrs. Brand knew it to be a death warrant, and it was some moments before she could look down at the sweet little face beside her, for Chrys was always suggestively ready to share her correspondence. "Come, dear," she said, gently; " mamma wants to see us, and we must go in and get clean faces and hands."

As she stepped into the street shimmering in the golden light of the afternoon sun, and felt her cheeks fanned by the soft air so instinct with the spirit of the new life flitting by with glint of wing and sheen of throat, her heart was riven by the sharp contrast between all this and that scene of decay to which they were hastening. Hitherto death had been a remote event in human lives, which had not trespassed upon her sympathies. She looked down at Chrys, the little child around whom the yearning tendrils of her love had wound themselves. A great sob filled her throat. If he were hers, how she would fight for her life!

" I can beat you wunning," he shouted, breaking away from her and bobbing on absurdly in an ecstasy of vigor.

" And he doesn't even know it," she thought, with a jealous pang for the little mother whose coming and going even on that long journey into a far country had no significance for the child whose lightest step her dull ear was yet quick to catch.

"Come, McMichael," said his father, who had been anxiously awaiting him. But the little boy drew back. "I 'fraid," he whimpered. Something in the ominous stillness of the house, in the whispered sentences of the grave-looking nurse who was answering Mrs. Brand's low-toned inquiries, awoke a vague awe in that impressionable little mind. He hid his face in Mrs. Brand's skirts.

"I am afraid you will have to take him up," said Mr. Overholt, doubtfully.

"Oh, no! I cannot," she exclaimed, involuntarily, with a sickening dread of the ordeal it implied. But the child clung to her, and at last, lifting him in her arms, she set her face resolutely towards the stairs. Though he was heavy to carry, she did not pause until she reached the bedside of his mother, whom she stooped and kissed quickly. "Now, darling, you kiss mamma." Chrys clambered over the edge of the bed after a remembered manner, and cuddled his soft, pink cheek against that other so soft and white.

Mrs. Overholt did not speak, but the strained look of yearning faded out of her eyes, and a little smile flickered across her pale lips.

Mrs. Brand walked silently to a chair and sat down, a great awe upon her. She had not sought this experience, but now that it had been fastened upon her she would not quail before it. This, then, was what they called death. Could one ever become hardened to it, and take it calmly, as an inevitable consequence of life? Her heart rose in bitter rebellion at the very thought of it, as her eyes sought the bed where Chrys lay babbling sweet bits of gossip into his mother's ear. What was it that dared arbitrarily to separate them?

"Mamma, my burfday's coming soon," murmured the child. "What are you going to give me?"

Mrs. Overholt half-turned her head. "My watch," she said, faintly. Her husband found it and placed it in the little hand that was fast losing its grip on the things of this world. Her fingers made an ineffectual effort to close over it, and Mrs. Brand, who had drawn near again, caught the look of distress in the dim, blue eyes. With an intuition which had not always been hers, she leaned over and, gathering the limp little hand in her own, she placed it softly in the child's warm, chubby fist. "For you — darling — always," lisped his mother, painfully. He gave a crow of delight, and covered her face and pretty golden hair with kisses. But her anxious eyes sought Mrs. Brand's again.

"My baby," she whispered, hoarsely. "My baby. Love him, watch him for me. Promise! Promise!" she repeated, her voice breaking into shrill insistency under the stress of her anxiety.

"My dear, I do, I do," said Mrs. Brand, brokenly. "I love him dearly, and I will do all in my power to help him to be what you would wish as long as I live."

Mrs. Overholt sank back exhausted, and Chrys pillowed himself against her shoulder again, cooing softly with delight over his "burfday" gift. Mrs. Brand knelt beside the bed, her mind filled with tumultuous questionings. What was she thinking of — this poor little woman, whose mental processes had never commanded other than a smiling tolerance? It had been her mission in this world to look sweet and "be good" with the same quality of "goodness" demanded of nice children. But Death had set his mysterious seal upon her, and at once her most trivial thought, her lightest whim invested themselves with a strange dignity, and invoked reverence in place of forbearance. "Oh, I would give anything to know what she thinks now — now, in the face of it all," thought Mrs. Brand, looking with wistful awe at the wasted little frame beside her.

But Mrs. Overholt's peaceful soul was cleft by none of the mysteries which to other eyes enveloped her. She was straying with unheeding feet through sunny meadows down to the brink of the river which had no terrors for her. After that last effort to confide her child to the woman-friend in whom she felt a clinging confidence, her mind lapsed back over the years to those early days when she had first felt the divine ecstasy of motherhood. She clasped her baby in her eternal arms of love again — that love which is immortal and defiant of death and its sting, and lulled by his light breath, for he had fallen asleep, she sank into happy dreams.

The door opened gently, and Dr. Challoner came in. Mrs. Brand drew back to make way for him, and as she watched him she was struck by the sense of an unfamiliar phase of the man whose characteristics she had so confidently ticked off time and again. He stood looking at the pathetic picture before him with compressed lips, and she knew that his kindly heart was smitten by it, but in the precision of his movements and in the sharpened alertness of his face she saw him no longer as the overgrown boy whose gaucheries of thought and speech had been a jest to her, but as the physician, keen and self-reliant. She had never watched him in a sick-room, and in her imagination she was wont to depict him against a drawing-room background amid delicate frailties of decoration whose ruthless destruction was momentarily a probability by reason of his unchastened "bigness." But now his quiet professional air impressed her strangely with a new sense of his ability and dignity.

"He doesn't even notice that I'm here," she thought presently, with a half irritable appreciation of his absorption in the case before him, for she had never realized what a monopoly of attention she had always expected her presence to obtain from him. But at that moment he turned and, coming towards her, said, "I think it will be better for the child to be taken away now."

She rose mutely and approached the bed where Mr. Overholt with tender hands was already separating Chrys from his mother's embrace. Tears filled her eyes as she thought that this was "the parting of the ways" for these two henceforth, and, with a bitter protest in her heart, she turned and went down-stairs. With a sudden longing for fresh air she stepped out on the porch. The night was still and chilly, and she shivered as she looked up at the stars gleaming coldly in the darkening sky. An appalling sense of the impotence of human love and human sorrow swept over her. What was the good of it all — of noble aspiration and yearning endeavor towards the ideal of a brain which could be crushed out of existence by the accident of a moment? A quickening fury flushed through her veins.

The sudden lifting up of the windows beside her recalled her to immediate cares, and she hurried in to find the two men in the parlor, Chrys in his father's arms, deep in the sleep into which he had fallen by his mother's side, his little hand still tightly clutching his watch.

"How shall I get him home?" inquired Mrs. Brand.

"Oh, I will carry him," replied Mr. Overholt, quickly. "I had thought of calling a cab, but the jolting would certainly wake him. And it is such a little way."

"I think you had better not do that, Mr. Overholt," said Dr. Challoner, a certain austerity in his tone. "It is well for you to be here, and as I need to see Mrs. Brand, I can relieve you of the necessity of going."

"What do you think of Mrs. Overholt's prospects for to-night?" inquired Mr. Overholt, as they stood before parting on the door-step.

"I can hardly tell. It all depends on her ability to resist such an attack as that of this afternoon, which is liable to recur at any time. Who will relieve the nurse to-night?"

"I shall do so myself. I prefer to," added Mr. Overholt in a manner which forbade remark, "especially after what you have told me."

They walked a little distance in silence, and then Mrs. Brand burst out passionately, "It is cruel! It is wicked! If I loved my child as that poor little woman does, my love should follow him somehow to the ends of eternity."

"Just think of it," she went on after a moment's pause; "I feel as if I had helped her get ready for execution. She is just to be killed in spite of every impulse and instinct of her being, which are all towards living. And what has she done to be punished so?"

"But I am not sure that her death is a punishment," said Dr. Challoner, quietly.

"No, I suppose it's a reward for good conduct! You must think it a small matter to be one moment full of the delight of living and being, and the next to be swept arbitrarily out of existence."

" ——'Thou wert one,
Fit to trample out the Sun.
Who shall say thine ardors are
But a cinder in a jar,' "

he repeated.

Mrs. Brand was silent a moment. Then she said contemptuously, "Surmises! Poetical poppycock! I am sick of it all. It's so easy to wrap the future in a sentimental mist, and prate about the immortality back of it."

Dr. Challoner made no reply, until she said irritably, "What is the matter with you to-night? Why don't you answer me?"

"Because you are not sincere," he said, stopping a moment to shift his heavy little burden into an easier position. "You have just as much faith in an immortal life as I have, but you have picked up some glib shibboleths, and are trying to entertain yourself by shouting them at me. As to Mrs. Overholt, who are you that you should presume to judge her life and its ending? Poor little woman!" he exclaimed, tenderly. "I am sure she was happy when she fell asleep with her child in her arms. Death has no terrors for her."

"No, because submission is easy when one's intellect is duped by a drug."

Dr. Challoner laughed.

"Yes, it's comical, isn't it?" she said, with a little quiver in her voice. "But I know how Patrick Bronte felt when he died standing."

There was no chance to say anything further, for they had reached the door. Dr. Challoner carried Chrys up-stairs, and then came down for a chat with Mr. Brand.

"How are things going, Arthur?"

"Well, I can't tell. It may go on just like this for days yet. But one can never tell."

"How is he bearing up?"

"Remarkably, I should say," answered Dr. Challoner, drily.

"He is a remarkable man. I don't know how he holds out. Why, here, the other night, he would insist on sitting up with that boy who was run over by the trolley. I protested about that. I told him that kind of work could be done just as well by other people; that it didn't pay for him to rack his nerves with that kind of thing. ''T isn't good business,' I said."

"But he went?" inquired Dr. Challoner, as some remark was evidently required from him.

"Went! Of course he went, after he had looked at me in that way he has, and said, 'Ah! I hadn't thought of it in that light before.'" Mr.

Brand laughed grimly. He had not been displeased at the futility of his appeal.

"Last week I begged him to accept a supply for Sunday. But he said no, that he had never permitted his private life to interfere with his duties to his people, and that he preferred to fulfill them at any cost to himself. And such a sermon as he gave us on tribulation. The climax — I shall never forget it," said Mr. Brand slowly. "You know Boyington, what an excitable fellow he is. We met at the church door, coming out, and he said to me, 'That was a good talk. I tell you that peroration was a pyrotechnic dream.'"

Dr. Challoner laughed. "Yes, that sounds like Boyington."

"I suppose that if a preacher can brace himself up to do it, the knowledge of his people's sympathy sustains him wonderfully at such a time."

"There are other things to sustain even a preacher," said Dr. Challoner, gravely, but Mr. Brand did not notice.

In reality, Mr. Overholt thought very little about the sustaining sympathy of his people. But he had so closely studied cause and effect in spiritual politics, and was so appreciative of the influence of oratorical setting and accessory that his pulse responsively quickened as he found himself the central figure in a situation furnishing a rich opportunity for dramatic interpretation. He would have felt contempt for the actor who should appeal to his audience for their sympathy to enable him to act. The proof of his ability lay in his power to compel from them a tribute to his genius. And on the previous Sunday he had certainly swept his audience with him — onward, to an exaltation of feeling, which in himself almost amounted to intoxication — intoxication with the charm of his own emotion.

Mrs. Brand came down-stairs after having settled Chrys for the night, and in the feeling of unrest of which each was conscious it was a relief to talk. They soon drifted into a discussion of Dr. Challoner's theories, and Mr. Brand manifested more interest than he had ever done before in the young man's plans.

"Ah! you're an enthusiast, Arthur," he said at last, with a sigh.

"I need to be," replied the doctor, simply. "You can't wet-blanket me by calling me names."

"Mr. Overholt says you're a socialist of the rankest type," observed Mrs. Brand.

"I wonder whether Mr. Overholt knows any better than you do what socialism is and is not," retorted Dr. Challoner wrathfully. "One would think, to hear some people talk, that it was a crime to know anything about the world's misery. But I tell you as long as there is sin and suffering in the world, the responsibility for it is yours. It isn't enough to pay your own debts. Your account is not settled until you've paid some other person's, too."

Mr. Brand was held to be a very just man, an expression which is not always flattering in its implication. But his justness had been mercifully tempered by his generosity, and it had never occurred to him that justice itself might demand from him a greater degree of self-sacrifice than his generosity had prompted. But while Dr. Challoner was talking that evening he had a dim vision destined to bear much fruit, of the difference between human justice and divine justness.

After Mrs. Brand and Dr. Challoner were gone Mr. Overholt returned to his wife's room to make the final arrangements for the night. The nurse was exhausted, having been on duty for many hours, and after leaving him the necessary directions, with many charges to awaken her if there was any sign of a change, she went away to sleep until half-past three. He read for a while and then, urged by some under-current of thought, he went over to the bed and stood looking at his wife. She was still in the stupor from which she had not roused for some hours. But at any moment she might have another attack similar to the one during which he had sent so hurriedly for McMichael, for in the midst of those horrible struggles for breath she had continually gasped his name in pitiful entreaty. Mr. Overholt shuddered at the recollection of it, for he had an intense shrinking from the sight of physical pain. "If I had to suffer so," he thought, "and knew that death must be the end, I should put the end to it all myself. Poor little girl! It's too bad." He touched her hand tenderly.

But his mind at once reverted to the thought familiar to him by frequent dwelling on it in the past. It had always fascinated him, and now he was confronted by an exact case in point. Why should it not be justifiable to put an end to the chance for further suffering? Was it not the kindest, the most humane thing to do? If one saw a helpless bird or a wounded animal in the clutch of hopeless pain there would be no argument about putting it out of its misery. It would be esteemed the most abandoned cruelty not to do so. He returned mechanically to his reading, but he soon found himself unconscious of the printed words in the stress of an argument which it was impossible to resist. The endless succession of disturbed nights and anxious days was working out its cumulative effect upon him now, and urging him to an act of which in moments less benumbed he would have counted the cost.

He had often said that if he had not been a minister he would have been a doctor, and medical theories and experiments had always had a distinct fascination for him, with the result that he was as well able to treat his wife as any hospital nurse could have been. Perhaps that was why he had been so chary of outside assistance in the care of her, though possibly his reluctance in this respect, which had not been unproductive of comment among his people, was heightened by his frank desire to preserve the privacy of his home. His wife's tongue was not always to be relied upon in matters requiring discretion, and there were matters regarding him that required discretion.

Yet he realized now more keenly than ever before what a good wife she had been to him. Countless memories of her sweet ways came crowding in upon him, and he dwelt upon them in tender reminiscence. But this long, wearisome struggle — how tired she must be of it! Then why — why not? Over and over again that one insistent thought came whirling back to him like a ball of flame. Gradually, in his dull brain their position became reversed. It was he lying there, a ghastly, physical spectacle, a weary spirit sighing for release from its nauseous prison house. Who was there brave enough to help him in his helplessness?

At last, with a spasmodic start he got up and paced the room, up and down, over and across, until the pattern on the carpet added its intricacies to the confusion in his brain. How tired he was? It seemed as if there were a cord about his head, and he wondered miserably how much tighter it would be before it snapped. There was a lounge in the room, and he mechanically drew it up nearer the bed. A few minutes later he was asleep, heavily, dreamlessly.

How long after was it, minutes or hours, that he was awakened with the sudden shock of a sound in the room, he did not know. His wife was sitting up in bed, gasping for breath. Mr. Overholt sprang up in a frenzy of horror, and then he turned towards the table on which were ranged the medicines.

It was nearly midnight when Dr. Challoner left the Brands', for conversation there had gone deeper than he had anticipated. Socialist as he might be, and carrying in his heart the scarred memories of cruel wrongs against his people, he held himself bound to accept whatever aid came his way from whatever source. But he belonged to the noble army of those that dream dreams —

those priceless dreams that have in them the germ of the world's redemption — and he had been moved to-night as never before to set forth to Mr. Brand the visions which he cherished.

As he came in sight of the parsonage, an impulse came over him to ascertain his patient's condition at that hour. But he knocked on the door repeatedly before it was opened by Mr. Overholt himself.

"I was passing this way again," said the doctor, "and thought I would run in a moment to see how things were going."

"Yes," said Mr. Overholt. But he remained standing with his hand guarding the door, making no effort by gesture or remark toward admitting his visitor.

"What's struck the man!" thought Dr. Challoner, impatiently. "He acts as if he were drugged." And abruptly pushing past Mr. Overholt he went up-stairs. Approaching the bed he leaned over the patient, but drew back the next moment surprised beyond the bounds of professional equanimity.

"She is dying!" he exclaimed, in a low tone of horror.

"Yes," assented Mr. Overholt. He stood at the foot of the bed looking at the doctor with a dazed expression in his eyes.

"She has had more morphia," continued Dr. Challoner. "When?" There was a tang in his voice which penetrated Mr. Overholt's dulled perceptions.

"Ah — I do not know. Let me think," he said, passing his unsteady hand across his forehead. "A little while ago, I think. Another attack was coming on. It has been a great strain; perhaps I should not have remained alone to-night. I am tired." The sentences came in disconnected jerks. Whatever Dr. Challoner's ideas might be, he could not but feel the utter prostration of the man before him. He was about to speak again when the nurse came hastily into the room.

"I heard your voice, and I was afraid something was the matter," she said by way of explanation. She busied about, anxious to impress herself upon the doctor. But he took no notice of her, and at last she subsided, furtively to await developments.

Dr. Challoner never forgot that night. It ranked among the tragical experiences of his life.

The eastern sky was flushed with the glory of the coming day when he left the house from which the soul of its little mistress had fled. The clammy horrors of that long nightmare still clung to him, and he turned and looked back at the house as if to assure himself that it was really there. The loss of a patient smote him always like a personal bereavement, but this — ah, he must not think of it. Not now, at least. But what could blind his brain to the thoughts which passed in riotous review before it! The fresh morning air seemed but to fan the flame of his imaginings to crueller activities.

CHAPTER VII

IMMEDIATELY after his wife's funeral Mr. Overholt went north with a couple of Eastern friends, and remained away until the early autumn. His church felt much alarm about him, for the remarkable self-control which he had maintained presaged a serious breakdown when the strain of pulpit and parish should be withdrawn.

"About McMichael," he said to Mrs. Brand a few days before his departure.

"That is all settled," she replied, quickly. "You could not possibly take him with you. Of course he must stay with us." She was so serious and so insistent that he finally deferred to her presentation of the matter.

"Then you will write me every week, and let me know how he gets on?"

"Oh, yes, I will see that you hear regularly."

"That was not what I asked." He looked at her intently with an air of gravity that was disconcerting. She waited for him to say more, but he volunteered nothing, and she felt herself growing warm under his continued gaze.

"Yes," she said, hurriedly, as if in doubt of his meaning, "you shall know everything about him, I promise you."

He still looked at her in silence, and she felt her resolution beginning to waver under this voiceless coercion. But at that instant Mr. Brand came in.

"Aren't you home unusually early?" she asked, with a deep sigh of relief.

"Yes. I felt tired to-day, and was glad to come home." He spoke wearily, and she looked at him with sudden anxiety, for her experience of suffering and death in the last few weeks had touched her into hitherto unthought-of tenderness. The world had been to her like a great curiosity shop, in whose motley display of sin and suffering, mishap and happiness, she had felt herself to have no part. But she could never feel like that again. A purpose had come into her life — a distinct intention to fulfill to the letter the promise made to Mrs. Overholt. She felt herself charged with the welfare of a little life, and already this responsibility was working out its potent ends upon her, destined as she had been from the beginning to stamp her simplest experiences with the most tragic interpretation possible to them.

Mr. Brand established himself comfortably beside the open window, and looked out approvingly at the brilliant panorama of bud and blossom outspread before him.

" Ah, I tell you! " he exclaimed, with a mighty inhalation; " this is a privilege after being cooped up in a dusty office all day." Then the two men drifted into talk about church affairs, and the arrangements necessary during the pastor's absence, until Mr. Overholt, rising at last to go, said: " What do you think, Mr. Brand? I have asked your wife to be kind enough to send me a few lines every week while I am gone about my boy. Of course I shall hear indirectly about him in several ways, but I should esteem it the greatest kindness if she should write me herself about him."

" Why, of course she will," said Mr. Brand, heartily. " Poor little chap! I'm real glad to think you've made up your mind to let us keep him. I don't know how Cecily would keep house without him now."

"That is settled then," said Mr. Overholt, with an air of relief as of having disposed of another detail of the business incidental to his departure. But his eyes sought the flash in Mrs. Brand's with a cool gleam, and then he was gone, leaving her in a futile tempest of indignation at his easy handling of the situation.

To Mr. Brand it seemed a simple matter of duty that she should write fully and frequently to the absent pastor about his child. Mr. Overholt had his peculiarities undoubtedly, and Mr. Brand had even felt himself occasionally puzzled to account for them, but accustomed as he had been to rate men and machines according to their ability to accomplish the work set before them, his admiration for his pastor's remarkable efficiency quite outweighed the trifling doubts that sometimes disturbed his mind. And he was anxious above everything to preserve his wife in her uncritical attitude towards the minister.

When Mrs. Brand sat down to answer Mr.

Overholt's first letter with a promptness that was due to her husband's urgency, she felt under proud compulsion to write without restraint. She gave him a full account of his son's latest sayings and doings. "Jane took him to Sunday-school with her yesterday, and when the teacher asked him if he hadn't a penny for the collection, he said indignantly: 'Oh, no! My poor papa has to work very hard for those pennies!' Mr. Brand is anxious for me to tell you this story, as he thinks it promises well for the future of the boy."

Mr. Overholt, lazily reading her letter under the shadow of far-away pine trees, smiled for many reasons. "I wonder why she's so fond of McMichael?" And then, with masculine assurance, he smiled again. He was feeling very happy just now. He looked back upon his married life, and thought of it as not having been at all disagreeable, but it was distinctly pleasant to be free from the necessity of formulating mitigating theories about it. Had the gift of choice been conferred upon him he could hardly have created a situation more to his liking than the present one. For while it was not a necessity of his nature that he should be in love with any one, it was essential to his complete enjoyment of life that he should hover perilously on the brink of it. And he had never before hovered so entirely to his liking.

In the meantime Dr. Challoner, plodding his way wearily through stifling alleys and swarming streets, had never before felt so oppressed by the bondage of his calling. He had established a little free dispensary, where he put in a couple of hours every day, but he no longer felt a glow of enthusiasm in his work, and was sometimes appalled at the irritation which these people roused in him with their nauseating ailments and ceaseless complaints. These were the times when he turned his back with scorn of repudiation upon his tenderly cherished theories. Such outbreaks were necessarily followed by seasons of remorse, which took the form of bitter conviction that he was utterly incapable of rendering any real service to humanity. The Brands had gone to the seashore and their house was shut up, but even had they been at home he could hardly have found palliation there, for he and Cecily had parted in anger.

"How dare you malign Mr. Overholt so?" she had burst out at him, after having forced from him some expressions of his feeling towards the minister. He looked at her in frank amazement.

"Have you constituted yourself his defender then — against me?" he asked, with a note in his voice which she had never heard before.

"I am not aware that he needs a defender," she replied, with dignity.

"Why, hang it all!" he exclaimed, hotly. "What's got into you? Since when have you been so innocent about him? Why, you told me once that you knew more ——"

That boomerang, it was a fatal weapon just then — for Dr. Challoner, and when he retired from that interview he did so with tingling ears and a misty mind, which sought relief in those mighty generalizations about womankind which distracted man finds at times so comforting. But the root of woman in general is always one woman in particular, and in later ruminations he reverted to that one. "Now, if I told her all that I think, she might have had reason for flying out at me." But there the matter remained, to harry him through the dog-days. To think that he and Cecily should actually have quarreled over that fellow! It was intolerable. But the more he thought about it the more complicated the whole affair seemed to become, and he wondered miserably whether he must reconcile himself to the rule of reservations in the acquaintance which had hitherto been so free of expression. It was, therefore, with manifold misgivings that he went to the Brands' to welcome them home on their return during the first week in September.

"Why, you miserable old thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Brand, surveying him at arm's length. "Whatever have you been doing to yourself?"

"That's so, Arthur," said Mr. Brand, chiming in; "I guess it's been pretty hard slumming it in the kind of weather you've been having."

"Oh, I could stand that all right if you people didn't go off, and leave me no place to fly to. I protest against that."

"Well, we won't do it again for a long time, Bruin, and you don't know how good it is to see you again." She beamed on him radiantly, and as if by magic all his doubts and difficulties rolled away, and he wondered what on earth he had been making himself such a fool about.

"I suppose Overholt's expected back next week," said Mr. Brand, after they had exhausted personal topics. "Well, it's time he got into the harness again, and if he feels as well as I make out he does from his letters to Cecily, I should think he was ready for it."

"From his letters to Cecily?" repeated Dr. Challoner. "What's he been writing you for?" he asked bluntly, turning to her.

"Oh, about Chrys," she replied, carelessly. "Such stupid letters, you can't think. One would suppose a man like that would make rather an interesting correspondent, but I suppose he saves himself for the public." She made a little grimace. "There's more in one of your letters than in ten of his, Bruin," she said, smiling at him enchantingly. He had often insisted to her that he could not tell a pretty woman from a plain one, but at that moment he honestly thought her lovely.

In the innocence of his heart he thought she must have forgotten all about the tiff they had had over the minister. That was exactly what she wished him to suppose, of course, for it would never do to let him suspect her of repentance in the matter. "He's too good to be let get sulky," she told herself, and, fortified by this magnanimous view of her character, it was easy to be gracious. As to Mr. Overholt's lack of brilliancy on paper, what she had said was quite true. He enjoyed receiving her letters, and read clever bits of them to his companions, but it was useless to attempt to answer them in what must of necessity be subject to Mr. Brand's scrutiny. He could afford to wait. Besides, he hated letter-writing.

After all, Mrs. Brand found it a real relief to turn again to the old-time friend about whom there lurked no subtleties of sentiment or mysteries of interpretation. "He's like a good, plain, Anglo-Saxon sentence," she thought, looking at him benevolently. "And the other — why, he's like the inscription on the palace wall at Padua."

"Well, Overholt's home," said Mr. Brand, a few days later, "and I shouldn't wonder if he dropped in this evening."

Mrs. Brand was seated at a table busily engaged in pasting pictures into a linen book. She arranged and rearranged them with an anxiety worthy of a more artistic cause, her husband probably thought, for he watched her with some amusement.

"Why don't you put in this?" he inquired, picking up a vignette of Abraham Lincoln, which she had thrown aside with a lot of others. "You want to teach him to be patriotic."

"Oh, no. It worries him dreadfully to see pictures of people without their legs on. I can never make him understand where their legs are. Besides," she added, scornfully, "this is not intended to be a Primer for Precious Patriots. I wouldn't have him know yet for the world that there ever was such a man as Abraham Lincoln. Jack the Giant Killer is a much more suitable hero."

She leaned back to survey the completed page, and Mr. Brand, perhaps by way of retaliation upon her for the heresy of her remarks, said somewhat brusquely: "Of course his father will be wanting the boy at once. I shouldn't think much of him if he didn't."

Mrs. Brand shut the book with a snap, and looked up quickly with the intention of saying something, but the words died on her lips, and she went abruptly towards the window, where she stood in silence looking out. Somewhere in the garden could be heard the erratic peals of a bell to which even distance could not lend a charm. They grew discordantly nearer as Chrys dashed by harnessed to an express wagon.

"Look at me, Aunt Cecily," he shouted, delightedly, as he caught sight of her at the window, "I'm a 'lectric car."

"What have you got under the basket?" she called back to him, referring to an inverted basket with an array of bricks on top of it.

"Oh, that's my passingzer — kitty. I put the bricks on so she could sit still." A little cloud came over his face. "I wish she was a boy, Aunt Cecily. She'd know so much more about 'lectricity." He waited for a moment, considering a pout, but a suppressed sound as of subterranean agony spurred on his flagging energies, and with an entrancing little gesture he blew Aunt Cecily a kiss from the tips of some very grimy fingers, and, with a premonitory peal from the dinner-bell, the car started on its devious course to the accompaniment of imprecations from the imprisoned passenger, who, after a long life faithfully devoted to the care of a family too numerous to mention, might reasonably have expected to spend her old age in peace. "How sweet and wicked he looked!" thought Mrs. Brand, approvingly. But when she turned to leave the room a few minutes later Mr. Brand, happening to look up from his paper, saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"It's the idea of giving up the boy, I'll be bound!" He was not unconscious of the fact that the prospect was an unpleasant one, but why make a fuss over the inevitable? He would miss the little chap, himself; who could help it?

But who could suppose that she would devote herself to a child as she had. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh and closed his eyes. His mind was busy with thoughts which were of late becoming frequent to it, for he felt bound to admit that his wife's character was no longer quite intelligible to him. It was disconcerting after he had laid it out to his entire satisfaction, with the same mathematical exactitude that he would have applied to the subdivision of a suburb, to find himself lost in a maze. In vain he followed every new lead, and burdened his mind with promising clues; they all conducted him plausibly to a blind wall. Was it possible that he could be jealous of the child whose presence effected so incalculable a difference in her? By no means, for he had at no time felt dependent upon her for his happiness. But in the plans that he had made for her, he had always figured as the supreme and benevolent factor of her life. There was not a trace of cowardice in his nature, else he would never have admitted to himself the thin-edged doubt which was working its way into his mind, and which was full of bitter suggestion to him. Moved by a sudden impulse, he got up from his chair and crossed the room to look at himself in a panel of glass set into a cabinet. He had been a handsome fellow in his youth, and had retired upon his early reputation in that respect with an easy belief in its endurance. But to-day he looked at himself through eyes from which the scales were falling. That deeply-furrowed face — ah, he would gladly have exchanged its noble lines of character for the unwrinkled insipidity of youth. And the white hairs which crowned his age with dignity — the stoop of those broad shoulders which had so bravely bent themselves to the bearing of life's burdens — he faced it all unflinchingly, and then went back to his chair with a sigh. He had always been so vigorous and his energy so resistless that he had not learned to think of himself as an old man. He had the contempt of a strong man for physical weakness, and was willing to endure martyrdom before admitting the condition of which he was becoming aware, which in itself was the real cause of this continued depression of spirits.

"Well, where is my boy?" asked Mr. Overholt that evening, after he had shaken hands with Mrs. Brand and received her congratulations upon his improved and tanned appearance, while he noted anew with practised eye the charm of her own.

"He was here a moment ago, but when we

heard you were coming he got lost," said Mrs. Brand, looking suggestively towards the table. "I don't think we could find him."

"That's too bad," remarked Mr. Overholt, gravely. "I wanted to tell him a story about a little monkey I saw down-town to-day. He had on a red cap and a red coat, and danced when his master played the organ."

"Was it a gurdy-organ?" inquired a muffled little voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Brand, it was a gurdy-organ, and when the man finished playing the monkey took off his cap, and walked around for pennies."

"Did you give him one?" inquired Chrys, inadvertently presenting himself to his father's clutch in his anxiety about the monkey's finances.

"Why, you don't mean to say you had forgotten Papa?" asked Mr. Overholt, after due preliminaries had been gone through with, and Chrys was submissively established on his knee.

"I so little; I don't know anything," faltered the child, feeling that some excuse for his heinous conduct must be forthcoming, and driven to his wits' ends to devise one. But to his relief this one appeared to be satisfactory, and then the floodgates of his speech were opened in earnest.

"I will show you my new book," he said, generously smiling upon his father, as he proceeded without delay to a sonorous exposition of its gaudy contents. "This is H, and means hipmapossamus. A hipmapossamus is a big fiss." Then with a sympathetic droop in his voice, "Poor hipmapossamus. He has to stay in the water all the time, and he gets all soaking wet. And these are buffits, and here are taggers."

"Buffits and taggers!" interjected Mr. Overholt, suddenly. "Great Cæsar, child! What dread beasts are those?"

"Buffaloes and tigers, no doubt," said Mrs. Brand. "But I should think you might infer from the picture before you, if you're giving it the attention Chrys will expect."

"I stand reproved," said Mr. Overholt. "I must admit I was thinking of something else."

Mrs. Brand did not look up from the bit of fancy-work with which she was toying, but she felt the intention in his remark, and she resented the tell-tale color that forced its way to her face.

This was not at all the readjustment she had planned when she had thought the whole affair over in the broad light of reason and at a safe distance from the enemy. But Chrys evidently objected to anything that threatened to interrupt the even tenor of his monologue, and he hurried on, a little frown of disapproval on his face. "I will tell you a story about a buffit and a boy. Once a little boy's mamma sent him down-town on an errand. But the naughty little boy ran away into the woods to play. And it was an awful beary-wood, and there were buffits and taggers there, too. And a great big buffit ran at him, and stuck him full of holes with its horns, and so he died. And the bears ate him up. And when his mamma came to find him there was nothing left but —— "

"Holes!" exclaimed Mr. Overholt, frivolously, much to his son's disgust and bewilderment.

"I must really congratulate you, Mrs. Brand, on the success of your training. I don't think I ever heard so hopelessly moral a tale before."

"I don't think it's due to me. Chrys is fond of strong effects."

"P stands for puffy-dog," continued Chrys, eyeing his father suspiciously. "B is for buff-fly. How do angels get wings on?"

This question came with a suddenness that was paralyzing. And as no one vouchsafed an immediate solution of the physiological problem, Chrys kindly spared the ignorance of his audience by moving on to an adjacent topic.

"E is for egg. And I will tell you, Papa, what you ought to do when chickens won't lay their eggs in their nests. You ought to get a nice, smooth, stone egg, and put it in the nest. Then the chicken would look in and see it and say, 'Oh some other people have been here, laying their eggs, and now I needn't mind.'"

Mrs. Brand laughed, but she said nothing. She had a feeling that in this, their first meeting after so long a separation, the father and his child should be left to themselves. But Mr. Overholt had other plans. He loved his boy better than anything else in the world, but we do not always enjoy most what we love best. Sometimes while he had been away he had affected to doubt Mrs. Brand's fascination for him; it was now all the more agreeable to luxuriate in the thrill that her presence undoubtedly produced in him.

"I suppose this boy doesn't stay up all the evening," he said now, turning to Mrs. Brand. "His conversation is like cayenne pepper, a little of it goes a long way."

He had expected the bell to be rung for Jane, but Mrs. Brand got up herself.

"Come Chrys," she said smiling, and holding out her hand.

But the child held back. "Then will you play tag?" he inquired, cautiously.

"Oh yes, I'll play tag," she answered.

"You don't mean to say he afflicts you like that?" exclaimed Mr. Overholt. "I think you had better let me take him home to-night."

"No, I can't do that. When you're settled into regular ways again I'll lend him to you."

A few minutes later Mr. Brand and the minister paused in their conversation to listen to the flying feet above.

"Oh, this performance takes place every night," said Mr. Brand, a trifle irritably.

"I've a great mind to go up there and give them a scare," said Mr. Overholt, and Mr. Brand offering no objection he stole lightly up the stairs. Just as he reached the top Mrs. Brand flew by. He felt sure she had not seen him in the dim light, and he started in swift pursuit of her. But she had seen him, and with a panic quite disproportionate to the occasion she vanished into the darkness, and fled down the back stairs. On her way to the sitting-room she encountered Jane, whom she sent up-stairs to attend to Chrys. Then she sat down to her work again, demurely enough, but with a glancing smile about her lips that belied her manner.

Her husband, laying down his paper for a moment, looked at her with a pang. It seemed almost cruel that she should look so young, "as young as when I first saw her," he thought, and wondered why. There was a charming color in her face, and her breath from running still came short between her smiling lips.

"Where is Mr. Overholt?" he asked.

"Up-stairs with Chrys," she answered, with sudden gravity. "I thought perhaps he would like a few moments alone with the child."

"You can't think how I appreciate your thoughtfulness," said Mr. Overholt. He was standing between the portieres. "No, thank you, Mr. Brand. I must go. But McMichael says you have a new picturegraph of him to show me, Mrs. Brand."

"Yes," she said, glad of an excuse to escape from his eyes. "It was to be a surprise for you when you came home." She went over to a large portfolio and took out the photograph. She looked about for a suitable place to stand it, and finally propped it up on the table where it would receive the best light.

"There!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "The photographer said it was the handsomest picture of the handsomest child he had ever seen."

"Oh, I suppose," said Mr. Brand dryly. "No doubt the man thought you were his mother."

Mrs. Brand ignored the remark. She stood facing her husband, looking at the photograph in rather a defiant attitude, her head thrown back, and one arm behind her. Mr. Overholt came over and stood beside her.

"It really is charming," he admitted after a moment. "I had no idea he could be worked up into such an effect as that." He leaned down to examine the finish of the picture, and then stepped back to his former place, but so close to Mrs. Brand that his shoulder touched hers. Mr. Brand had turned his back on them, and was deep in his paper. There were two things in a man's life that he really believed nothing but death or a fire should be suffered to interrupt, his prayers and the perusal of his paper. And so it happened that before Mrs. Brand could move away, she felt herself in the vise of an electric shock for Mr. Overholt had grasped the hand she had thrown so carelessly behind her, and held it with a firmness that was effectual against any ordinary methods of escape. She stood there beside him, a prisoner flushing and paling alternately, desperate one moment, terrified the next lest they should betray themselves to Mr. Brand.

"How long ago was this taken?" asked Mr. Overholt, coolly.

"About a month ago. It was done in New York." It seemed to her that she spoke in heart-beats.

"I have generally managed to get even with people who have put me under obligations to them," he went on in his even voice, "but it puzzles me to know how to deal with you, especially when you won't play tag," he said, with his frank laugh, letting her hand drop at last. "Am I to take this home with me to-night?"

"I will send it to the parsonage," she said struggling to keep the indignation out of her voice.

Mr. Overholt said good-night to Mr. Brand, and then held out his hand to Mrs. Brand, and she was forced to offer him the one he had held but a moment before.

"There is no way in which I can even faintly express my gratitude to you." His eyes dwelt on hers mournfully, and his voice matched them with its melancholy cadence. "As for McMichael, if a little child's love counts for anything, you know how complete has been your conquest."

As they stood there, Mrs. Brand with her stately head downcast, and Mr. Overholt bending towards her, the expression on his face one of reticent grief, Mr. Brand looking up suddenly at them was struck by a thought as keen as sharpened steel.

CHAPTER VIII

The first Sunday after Mr. Overholt's return from his vacation found the Church of the Pilgrims packed to the doors. The occasion was an interesting one from any point of view — certainly not the least so to the minds of a score of self-prospective mothers-in-law, for whatever odium attaches to that domestic office there is none so earnestly coveted. American maidenhood of all sorts and sizes, of every type and tint of feature as of finance, displayed itself before the pulpit on that sunny September morning, row upon row. While any lack of devotion to his wife's memory would have been esteemed a serious lapse on the pastor's part, yet there was a thrill of suspicion in beauty's breast that while his heart might very appropriately be in the grave his eyes were still at large, and subject to arrest.

At two minutes to eleven the church was full, and in breathless condition subsequent to the forced march by which the average Sunday morning congregation arrives at its destination. Mr. Overholt was in his place, the cynosure of sympathetic eyes, his head bent forward upon his clasped hands, as the first, faint notes of the organ fell upon the waiting throng, when a group moving slowly up the aisle attracted to itself general attention. "There goes Brand," whispered a newcomer; "he's got money to burn."

"Guess he needs it. Youth and beauty come high," replied his companion, laconically.

"See!" palpitated a maiden to her mother. "She's got his boy with her."

For Mrs. Brand had assumed the responsibility of bringing Chrys to church with her, and as she followed her husband to his pew she was by no means unconscious of the unusual interest aroused by this particular "weekly spectacle we are to make of ourselves" as she had characterized their church-going. But she was to-day the central figure in a picture that lingered long in the memories of some who saw it. Though golden with the glow of September's sun the weather was like cider with a bead on it — there was a nip in the sparkle like a foretaste of frost, and this tall, stately woman looked like the spirit of the season made manifest *à la mode.* She was all in golden, brown velvet with revelations here and there of dull, pink satin linings, and in her face there was an unwonted touch of color to offset the brilliant beauty of her eyes. For a moment, as she had stolen a parting glance at herself in her mirror, she had longed to believe in the beauty that it reflected to her. Then she shook her fist at it derisively. "No, I can fool other people, but I'm not such a fool as to fool myself." This morning the usual proud aloofness of her bearing was tempered by her solicitude for the child beside her, whose graceful, little figure but accentuated the fine outlines of her own.

Could Miss Alta High, the "vocal-highkicker" as Mr. Boyington called her, of that famous quartet that worshipped God on Sundays for revenue only at the Church of the Pilgrims, have realized how little Mr. Overholt heard of her solo that morning she would have smiled less sweetly upon him when he complimented her so fittingly upon it at the end of the service. And could the honorable promoters of Beauty's prospects have realized how slight was the impression made upon him by the charms they led in train, perhaps they would not have trod on each others' toes quite so assiduously for precedence in greeting their spiritual director.

Up in the gallery sat Dr. Challoner, who had not been even a casual attendant at the Church of the Pilgrims, where religion according to his mind was more a matter of pretence than of practice. He had had a "private view" of the character of one of its most honored officials, a man who was a property owner in Moon Street, and who had waxed fat upon the blood-money of his rentals. Dr. Challoner never saw him without a swift vision of that section of hell which was held on earth in his name.

But an irresistible curiosity had drawn him hither this morning. Here in the presence of this handsome theological expert he relinquished himself to the subtleties of an enigma that defied solution. "Is the man a downright villain, or is he an erratic genius who suffers from the restraints of a mistaken calling?" he asked himself for the twentieth time, as he listened to the modulations of a prayer " which for beauty of thought and perfection of utterance has never been surpassed in this city," as one of the great dailies enthusiastically described it twenty-four hours later. But behind all Dr. Challoner's impersonal criticisms of the minister there was wedged a suspicion that haunted him — he had not forgotten the death of this man's wife.

Chrys comported himself until the beginning of the sermon with commendable discretion, but he succumbed quickly to his father's eloquence, and sank in a soft, little heap against Mrs. Brand's arm. She shifted her position slightly to accommodate the sleepy, little head, and then she lifted her face, sweet with the tenderness of a lingering smile, to the speaker. In that instant some subtle force administered to her a shock that struck the smile from her lips, and left her shivering with an indefinable sense of repulsion and dread. What was it? She looked in bewilderment at her husband, but his face seemed even more rigid than usual. Her glance fluttered back to Mr. Overholt, and then she felt herself shaken again by an uncontrollable emotion. Something within her was struggling — was shrinking back from him, far beyond the confines of the crowded church, out towards the sun-swept spaces of eternity. For those fleet moments of crisis she knew herself in the grasp of a power that compelled her to a swift vision of this man as he was and in the fierce light of its illumination she shuddered again and again with irrepressible loathing. Brilliant periods of oratory fell unheeded upon her dulled ears, and the sermon reached its conclusion in a climax of eloquence that won it an enduring place among homiletical models without moving her. The voices of the choir rose in an enthusiastic burst of moral sentiments, and then the congregation waited in silence the words of benediction. Chrys stood on uncertain little legs at Mrs. Brand's side, but Mr. Brand did not rise, and as his wife glanced back at him she saw with sudden alarm that his head had fallen heavily forward upon his breast. She bent over him in distress, but in the moments of bewilderment that followed she realized nothing with any clearness save that Dr. Challoner was there, and that in his presence there was strength. She felt the pressure of people about her anxiously inquiring what had happened, and then it lessened, and Dr. Challoner said to her quietly: "Take my arm, and come to the vestry." She had quite forgotten Chrys until he clutched her hand. In the vestry they found Mr. Overholt from whom any sight of the occurrence had been obscured by the crush of people towards the doors. He had already been so overwhelmed with congratulations that it seemed after all only natural that these friends should come to add their tribute to his genius. So he came forward with a smile, and the air of alert *gallanterie* that was indigenous to him in the presence of a woman. But Dr. Challoner lifted his hand imperatively to ward off trivialities of speech, and said quickly, "Mr. Brand has had a seizure of some sort, and I have brought Mrs. Brand here to wait for a few minutes."

It was in moments like this that Mr. Overholt's directness of sympathy and unaffected kindliness bound to him people who were uninfluenced by his ability, or even sceptical of its integrity of purpose. In the instant of Dr. Challoner's remark his brain grew tense, and no doubt he felt as shocked as he looked. He rolled forward a chair for Mrs. Brand, and then he turned to the doctor. "You must let me do the first thing I can that will be of any service to you."

Dr. Challoner hesitated a moment, looking doubtfully at Mrs. Brand. "Never mind me," she said. "Go — both of you." So they hurried away.

After an interval of some minutes Mr. Overholt returned alone. "Now if you will come with me, Mrs. Brand, I will drive home with you. Dr. Challoner is on his way there with your husband." His manner toward her was an exhibition of himself at his very best — a differential kindliness that left nothing to be desired. But she was almost unconscious of him, until just as they reached the door when he said gently, "I think you will agree with me that it is better that I should take McMichael home. You will have many things to attend to if Mr. Brand should not rally immediately."

She looked at him a moment in silence, unconscious of the wistful appeal in her eyes. She was full of undefined doubts and alarms of which he was the vital cause, though perhaps she did not realize that, for the inrush of subsequent impressions had swept from her mind all remembrance of her experience during the sermon. With a sudden tightening of her heart she bent down and kissed the child. Her guardianship of him was ended. She did not speak during the homeward drive, but when she came to part from Chrys he clasped his strong little arms about her neck.

"Let me go, dear. Uncle Brand is sick, so sick, and he wants Aunt Cecily."

"Doesn't he want me too?" wailed Chrys, with an instant sense of injury. She unclasped his fingers gently, whispering to him the while.

"Yes, I know, Aunt Cecily," he answered tearfully. "I are a big man." Then with an ominous droop in his voice he added, "But I a very little big man."

A drawn smile crossed her face. "No," she said to Mr. Overholt. "Don't come in with me now, but — but do all you can for Chrys."

Dr. Challoner met her in her sitting-room, and the sight of his face brought to her again the same feeling of rest and refuge of which she had been conscious in the church.

"Come now!" he exclaimed, reassuringly. "Don't look at me with such big, anxious eyes. Uncle John is doing nicely, and I daresay in a few days we shall know hardly anything about this. Dr. Bradbury is with him. I saw you coming and hurried down to meet you."

"What was it? Paralysis?"

"Just a slight stroke."

"It's the beginning of the end?" she asked, the words coming boldly from her eager lips.

Dr. Challoner looked at her in silent outrage, which, in her absorption, she interpreted as tacit acquiescence in her remark. For some moments she said nothing and then, bringing her hands together suddenly, she spoke with low-toned intensity, as if the words were inexorably crushed out of her.

"I have been a cruel woman. He has been kind and good to me ever since he saw me first, and I have cared nothing about him." She would have spoken further, but Dr. Challoner said with peremptory abruptness, "Be quiet! You are excited by what has happened, and are ready to imagine all sorts of things. When Dr. Bradbury comes down you shall hear his report."

"And then may I go up to him?" she asked, with a humility that sat strangely upon her.

"I fear that would be unwise," he said reluctantly. "His recovery depends entirely upon absolute freedom from mental excitement, and you are overcharged with that yourself just now. Try to be patient. There will be plenty for you to do."

He looked at her with careful scrutiny, wondering what further complexities were involved in the revelation she had just made to him of her attitude towards her husband. Her pride and his innate delicacy and loyalty had been sufficient safeguard against any interchange of opinion on a marriage that had seemed to him strange at first, but which time had accustomed him to think of without surprise. Now he was gradually becoming certain that between herself and Mr. Overholt there was some mystery. "He holds one end of the string and she the other," he thought as he looked at her, and then in spite of a sense of anger and exasperation his heart softened at the sight of her forlorn appearance. After all, what had life brought her? Only what she had brought to it. An insignificant woman would have remained insignificant in spite of the purchasing power of wealth and position. And to be an old man's wife was not a sinecure. Whatever his misgivings about Mr. Overholt might be, within his heart he harbored no doubts of her real loyalty to her husband. But for the first time he realized how difficult must be a loyalty of the letter unless reinforced by that of the spirit. An uncontrollable impulse seized him.

"Whatever your difficulties are, do not speak of them to anyone. If you must have help at any time, you know that you can rely on me for it," he said, weakly enough considering the ebb and flow so fast and furious beneath the surface of his thoughts.

"I know, Bruin." But already Mrs. Brand's mood had changed, and he saw with a curious sense of relief the return of her reserve.

Mr. Brand rallied with a rapidity that exceeded the doctors' most sanguine predictions. When he was able to be down-stairs, and to attend for a short time every day to the details of such business as was imperative, Mrs. Brand's sitting-room began to bear a resemblance to a down-town office. Old cronies and business acquaintances came in frequently to spend an hour with him, and sought to encourage him by noisy comments on his steady improvement. "He'll be as good as new again in no time." He listened to them with indifferent contempt, for he knew better, and his mind was hungrily occupied with schemes that cried aloud for time, that precious time which was slipping through his fingers like the hurrying sands in an hour-glass.

Sometimes he would sit in silence for a long while looking at his wife, and she would divine in him a new tenderness for her quite unlike the boastful pride which had often aroused her resentment.

"Poor child!" he murmured one day, unconsciously giving utterance to the feeling that beset him as he watched her.

Difficult tears filled her eyes, and a little while later she went up-stairs and gave way to a passion of grief and regret. She would have given anything at that moment to be able to persuade herself that she loved him then or that she ever had.

Shut in as Mr. Brand now was from the active pursuit of money-getting, for the first time in his business existence he had unwonted opportunity for the study of relative values. His religion stood him in good stead, and with the calm assurance which came from years of conviction he dwelt upon the beatific vision so soon to become the enduring reality. Day by day he loosened his hold upon the cares of the life which had hitherto engrossed him. The present, for him personally, ceased to be of importance. His interests and his hopes, all those vague delicate yearnings of which he himself was hardly conscious, had seemingly passed on ahead of his poor, disabled body into that habitation not made with hands. Perhaps it was because of the severed associations that were so soon to be knit again in the bonds of eternity that his mind reverted with strange tenacity to his early experiences. Hardly a day passed in which he did not lose himself in those long-past times of struggle and stress, when he had felt strong to face the world and its chances with his happy-hearted little Mary at his side. He turned over with the delight of discovery bits of their experiences, which had since lain forgotten in his mind. How fresh it seemed and how sweet! His heart beat again like the boy's it had been then when first he wooed her. She was only a slip of a girl in a pink sunbonnet. How he had hated that sun-bonnet — it was always in the way.

He came back to the cold reality of his present life with a sense of shock, and a consciousness of loss, which made him feel almost guilty. For with that mellow past and in the nearing future between which the present was but a narrowing step, his wife had no part. The wife who had died with their baby — how could anyone take her place?

But his mind dwelt upon his young wife's future with increasing anxiety. Perhaps he overrated the attractiveness in which he had taken so much pride, but he could not ignore the dangers which would beset a woman still young, who should become the mistress of her fate and of his fortune. The thought which had pierced him with its poisoned tip just before his illness recurred to him continually, but there was no rankling bitterness in it for him now. The more he considered it the more he felt he was called upon to be a kind of Providence to his wife. What did she know of life? But he, understanding her and her needs, and the circumstances surrounding her — there was a solemn responsibility laid upon him which he must not shirk. It was such a clear case, and it grew daily more fascinating to him. It would be the solution of all his anxieties concerning her, temporal and spiritual. But how to attain it? That he set himself patiently at work to discover.

Mr. Overholt came in to see him frequently, and they discussed everything from the state of the stock market to the minutest matter of church detail. They discussed people, too, Dr. Challoner, and even Mrs. Brand, and Mr. Overholt who could not know that Mr. Brand was pursuing an investigation along original lines, and with unusual ends in view, was sometimes distinctly astonished at the problems that were propounded in these conversations. But he met them all with unfailing tact and readiness.

One warm springlike day in November Mr. Brand seemed to feel a return of the vigor that had carried him unflinchingly through over half a century of business drudgery. When Dr. Challoner came in at eleven o'clock he preferred an unexpected request.

"See here, Arthur, I've listened pretty patiently to your tirades about your people and all that sort of thing, but I've been too busy to pay much attention to it. Now I may never feel again as well as I do to-day, and I just want you to take me to the worst sink-hole you've got. I want to see the thing for myself."

Dr. Challoner hesitated. Yet it was the one thing above all others which he had often desired. "I do not know," he said slowly. "Perhaps you do not realize —— no, of course you could not, the horror of those places."

"That's all the more reason why I should see it," said the old man sturdily, with deepening lines of anxiety on his furrowed face.

"I don't know," said Dr. Challoner again. "Let us consult Dr. Bradbury first." He was unwilling to assume a responsibility that he might plausibly be charged with having invited in his own interests.

"Dr. Bradbury!" exclaimed Mr. Brand, contemptuously. "When I say I want to do a thing it means I'm going to do it." He was getting angry and excited.

Mrs. Brand, who had been sitting by in silence, looked up from her work to say quickly, "Don't argue about it, Arthur. John knows what he wants and what he can do better than anyone else."

"That's right, Cecily!" said her husband heartily, with a smile of approval for her, at which she felt an odd, little quiver of gratitude.

"I think I will go down and see Chrys while you are gone," she said, as she followed them out to the carriage with parting words of caution. "The poor, little monkey must think I have deserted him."

"Why don't you bring him back to stay a couple of days?" inquired Mr. Brand.

"Should you mind? He would make a good deal of noise, you know," she added doubtfully, tempering her eagerness.

"No," he called back, as the carriage drove off, "not if it would please you to have him."

CHAPTER IX

Mr. Brand returned from his tour of inspection apparently none the worse for the fatigue that it had entailed upon him. Indeed it was but the initial stage of an investigation that he pursued with the same relentless devotion to detail which had marked his career in the business world. Mrs. Brand's sitting-room underwent a further transformation; it became the rallying-point of people as motley in opinion as in apparel.

"Whatever is he after?" said Mrs. Brand to Dr. Challoner.

"I don't know, and I expect to have to wait to find out. Sometimes I feel rather apprehensive."

"Of what?"

"Schemes. Organization. Don't you see?" he said, smiling down at her. "When you have just your heart and two hands to work with, it's easy. You're simply one humble man, and you do every next thing that comes in your way. And that's all you can do. There aren't any complications about it. You just try to love your neighbor as yourself. Perhaps you don't even succeed very well, but you keep on trying. But when you begin to plan how to spend money on your neighbor ——" he paused with a wry face.

"But, Bruin, you know you've always been wanting money for them."

"Of course. But that was for a particular man who was starving or a particular woman who was dying. If you saw a person freezing to death, and you had a blazing fire in your room, you wouldn't sit down and elaborate a scheme as to the best method of resuscitating him."

"But if you saw ten thousand freezing?"

"That's just it. There have been times when the only thing that saved me from despair was the remembrance that I was only one man and was responsible for only one man's work."

He fell into silence, and Mrs. Brand studied him for a while. At last she said, "What a funny Bruin!"

"That's so!" he exclaimed, heartily. "To talk like this when my head fairly seethes with wild schemes. I tell you it's a providence that so few people can carry out their schemes in this world, or it wouldn't be habitable very long. Good people, like myself, I mean."

They both laughed, but Dr. Challoner went on earnestly enough, "There never was a cause yet worth struggling for that wasn't purified and developed by every rebuff it got. As a power for good, for instance, I should think that persecutions must compare very favorably with prayer-meetings. It's all part of the great plan. We don't always happen to see it that way. I didn't when I called on Deacon Davis to offer him my compliments on the state of his tenements in Elysium Row."

Whatever his intentions might be Mr. Brand had apparently no confidences to share with anyone regarding them. But one thing became very clear to those about him. And that was the ascending scale of his respect for Dr. Challoner.

"I've talked with scores of people about this thing," he observed to Mr. Overholt, "lawyers, college professors, political economists, and economical politicians, laboring men, mechanics, factory girls and what not, and I tell you among the whole lot of them there isn't as much common sense as Challoner has in his little finger. Dead loads of theory, but not one of them ready to get down and hustle in the dirt."

Certainly, in the opinion of some people Mr. Brand was choosing extraordinary means to arrive at the knowledge he was in quest of. By invitation a dozen or more of his business and professional acquaintances gathered at his home one morning, while he laid before them the conditions of life within a radius of half a mile having Moon Street as its center. Then he asked them as a personal favor to himself to visit the district specified under the escort of Dr. Challoner, and at the end of a week to report to him what recommendations, if any, they felt justified in making with a view to its betterment. Of the work of committees in general he was as sceptical as Dr. Challoner himself, but he foresaw a variety of results from this one, and he was not disappointed.

"Moon Street," said Mr. Boyington, reflectively. "Seems to me that's about where my wife's property must be. But it's all in the hands of her agent, and I'm not responsible for it."

Mr. Brand smiled grimly. In the course of his investigations this fact had come to his knowledge. "Well, Boyington, if I were you I believe I'd make that agent's acquaintance."

"I'll make a note of that," said Mr. Boyington, appreciatively. He was always making notes of things, apparently for the sake of consigning other people's demands upon him to a decent burial, in black and white oblivion. But Mr. Brand was not without hope in spite of the note-book.

After setting various details of time and meeting-place with Dr. Challoner, these men, some of whom were the busiest in the city, separated into groups of twos and threes to seek again their accustomed haunts of trade.

"Too bad about Brand," said one, regretfully.

"I'd have sworn by that man's common sense a year ago."

"Well, I don't know. Somebody's got to take these things up, and if they're half as bad as he says it's a pretty serious matter."

"That's all right if you think so. But I'm not going to waste my time on any fool's errand. I never saw anybody yet that went into that kind of thing that didn't exaggerate it out of all resemblance to the real conditions. I know what that section's like, and I tell you those people are attached to it. They don't want anything better."

"More's the pity, perhaps," said his companion, shortly.

"No, I don't see that. Happiness is, after all, merely a matter of adjustment to one's environment, and I know lots of those people are far more comfortably adjusted to theirs than we are to ours."

"But don't you see —— "

"No, I must confess I don't. The sun shines on the just and the unjust. We're born and we die, and that's the most that can be said of any of us whether in Moon Street or out of it, and all they've got to show, and all I've got at the end of it is six feet two of ground that nobody else wants."

This was the deacon who had suffered at Dr. Challoner's hands.

"Give him a chance, Arthur. Give him a

chance," Mr. Brand had said, when his nephew protested against their inviting him to confer with them. "He's just the kind you've got to learn to use in this world if you want to do anything worth while."

The strain to which Mr. Brand was subjecting himself began to tell upon him, but he was deaf to all remonstrance. He knew that his life was grudgingly doled out day by day to him by the miserly fingers of Fate, and all his remaining energy was concentrated in one supreme effort to materialize the ideas that were assuming definite shape in his mind.

"If the Lord will but grant me time!" he exclaimed one morning, his mental stress being such that the thought unconsciously escaped into speech.

"Don't you think He can carry out His designs without your assistance?" inquired his wife unable, to her own instant regret, to resist this opportunity for a little fling. Away from him, in the amphitheatre of her own mind, it was easy to enact a drama in which she was swayed by sublime motives.

Fortunately Mr. Brand was too much absorbed in his own reflections to be conscious of his wife's remark. He stared at her vacantly, his mind revolving in an insistent whirl the details of the plan that absorbed it. He saw the difficulties in the way as clearly as the most unsympathetic scoffer, but he was convinced that the resultant evils would be infinitely less than the existent ones, and, after all, he realized more clearly every day that his inability to know infallibly what was best did not absolve him from the necessity of acting on what knowledge he possessed. His fortune had come to him through legitimate channels of business enterprise, and he had no qualms whatever about the possession of it. He was not by nature a generous man, but his strong religious convictions had developed in him a fine appreciation of his duty, more valuable to himself and the world at large than the most enthusiastic impulse of undisciplined and spasmodic generosity. A life-long habit of submission to a Will superior to his own had had its marvelous effects upon a character naturally and by circumstances ordained to be self-assertive and self-sufficient. That day, when he had followed Dr. Challoner from one wretched tenement to another, there had come to him with tremendous urgency the revelation that what these people needed desperately beyond the alleviation of their immediate misery was something which his money could not get for them. The farther he penetrated into the rotten core of all this wretchedness the more rapidly his wealth depreciated in value in his own estimation. Whatever good he might be the means of accomplishing would after all be but secondary to that already compassed by a lonely worker, whom he had sometimes impatiently considered a "crank." His clear perception of this fact did credit to his sense of justice, and was of inestimable value in determining his ultimate policy. These people thought of Dr. Challoner as their friend. There could be no doubt of that.

"Do you find them grateful to you for what you have done, Arthur?" he asked afterwards.

"Oh no, not often. In that as in other respects they're astonishingly like us," said the young man, drily.

Mr. Brand chuckled.

"But then, why should they be? They don't want charity. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it's forced on them against every instinct of self-respect they've got. There's the soup-kitchen where I help sometimes. What business have I to offer a man soup when he wants work? I hate to give an able-bodied man soup. It's an insult to his manhood and mine."

Mr. Overholt, who happened to be calling, smiled slightly at the doctor's indignation. It seemed to him overdone. For himself he wished Moon Street at the bottom of the deep, salt sea, for he was heartily sick of the whole thing, and weary of affecting an interest in it that he could not feel.

"What was your object in asking your friends to wait a week before meeting with you again?" he inquired of Mr. Brand.

"I had a good many reasons. I wanted to find out, for instance, how many or how few of them would have any interest whatever in the matter at the end of a week."

Perhaps more had than he expected. Yet there were only five men at the second meeting.

"I don't know, Brand," began Mr. Boyington, immediately, "whether I've got any time to spend talking over plans with you, for I've got my hands full with my own. When Challoner got through harrowing our feelings that day I went home and told my wife what her property was like, and it made her just sick. She inherited it from her father, you know, and she's always had such an idea about being independent that I never interfered about it. Well, nothing would do the next day but she must go around with me herself, and the end of it is the agent's bounced, and she says she's going to be her own agent after this. What do you think of that for a saintly, little woman like my wife?" he asked, looking around him with irrepressible pride. "By gracious, there wasn't any place too vile for her to poke her way into."

"Tell her we're proud of her," said Mr. Brand. "If everybody had her spirit and grit there wouldn't be such awful problems for the few to solve for the many. Don't you think so, McGarvey?"

"I'm not sure about that," replied McGarvey, carefully. He was a long, lean Scotchman, quiet and cautious — a man apt to be overlooked before you knew him, but never afterwards. His looks were unimportant, but he was the possessor of a sandy beard without which, according to certain frivolous folk, he never could have attained his success in life. In moments of extreme mental tension every human being has some refuge to which he flees. Some seek it in prayer; some find it in the sympathy of a friend. McGarvey found it in his beard. The usage of years had divided it into two meagre red lines, the sport of every passing breeze, but it seemed indisputable, nevertheless, that from these insignificant extremities Mr. McGarvey derived all the physical and moral courage that he needed. Confront him with any unexpected problem — he was mute until by winding his beard around his fingers he had succeeded in harnessing his fingers firmly to his head. Then he felt himself in touch with the universe, and able to grapple with the gravest problems of human experience and destiny.

"I do not know about that," he began again, having adjusted himself securely. "You say, sir," he went on, turning to Mr. Boyington, "that your wife has dismissed this agent who was undoubtedly unworthy. You say that in the future she intends to do the work herself. Possibly it may be better done." Mr. Boyington looked suddenly fierce. "But I doubt it," continued Mr. McGarvey, firmly. "In the meantime I should like to inquire what is to become of the agent. If, as we hear it frequently stated, the regeneration of society is best accomplished by the direct, personal effort of one individual for another, I think my inquiry is a pertinent one. And it seems after all but a direct application of the spirit of your remark to me," he concluded, looking at Mr. Brand.

"But the fellow was a regular, dishonest rascal," broke in Mr. Boyington excitedly. "If he got his deserts he'd be inside the State's Prison."

"Precisely. And yet that is exactly the individual we prate about its being our desire to reclaim until we are afraid we may have actually to come in contact with him. We are sincere enough in wanting to reform him if we can only do it by a set of resolutions."

Mr. Boyington looked forlorn. "Well, by

gracious, what is a man to do when he wants to do something?"

"You see," pursued Mr. McGarvey, inexorably, "you've simply turned this fellow loose now after affording him the encouragement of indifference all these years to operate his dishonesty on some unsuspecting person, who is perhaps not at all as well able to stand it as you have been."

"Well, hang it all," exclaimed Mr. Boyington desperately, with a distracted expression in his round, good-humored face, "if you know so much about it perhaps you'll be good enough to let a little of your wisdom loose. What do you think I ought to have done?"

"That depends altogether on the character of the man," said Mr. McGarvey, patiently. "If you consider him a hopeless scoundrel it might be your duty to society to put him in State's Prison but ——"

"Did you ever think," said Dr. Challoner eagerly, "how few hopeless criminals there really are?" Mr. McGarvey looked at him with calm approval. "Mr. Boyington would perhaps find that out, I was thinking," he remarked, in his slow, temperate way.

"Has he any family?" inquired Mr. Brand. They were now all so interested in this individual case that they had quite forgotten having assembled for any other purpose than to consider it.

"Well, I should say so!" groaned Mr. Boyington. "A dozen children, I should think — twins and what not — a sick wife, and an old mother or something." He had reached the point where he could only find comfort by blackening his conduct beyond any hope of extenuation.

"How great has been the extent of his dishonesty, do you think?" inquired Mr. McGarvey.

"Why, you see, it was fixed this way. My father-in-law had known this man's family since he was a boy, and as he lived right in that quarter and knew all about it, he thought he couldn't have a better agent. So he appraised the yearly rentals at a certain figure. From that he deducted what he considered a fair salary for the man, and a reasonable average for repairs. The sum left was what he received from the agent, who was then at liberty to realize what he could from the property."

"There it is!" murmured Dr. Challoner.

"I shouldn't wonder if the man did the best he could with a bad business," said Mr. Brand.

"That's just what I'm afraid of now," continued Mr. Boyington, dejectedly. "When my wife went over that place and saw the condition of things she was just wild, and she gave that man his walking-papers instanter. He tried to explain, but that only made it worse. And I believe he was kind of stunned. You see, she couldn't get it out of her head that he was to blame for the whole thing. Tell you what — I'll see that man again this very day."

Mr. McGarvey, who had wound and unwound himself a great many times during this interview, now made a final disposition of his beard with a sigh of relief, and the conversation drifted into a wider discussion of the needs of Moon Street and its vicinity. At last the gathering darkness of the early December evening warned them that they must break away from the subject that had grown so interesting. Mr. McGarvey took Mr.

Boyington in tow, and Dr. Challoner smiled as he caught a few words of the advice that the Scotchman was pouring out with impassioned eagerness.

"That man's pure gold," said Mr. Brand when they were all gone, and he and the doctor were alone. "He has a genius for details, and the kindest heart in the world."

"So has Mr. Boyington, I suppose."

"Yes, and that's about all they have in common. But it's a strong bond, and they'll do each other good."

There was a long silence, and then Mr. Brand began to talk again, but with difficulty, for the going over of his opportunities and his aspirations to another man was not an easy task. "It has been a hard day, Arthur, but my anxieties are nearly over. I hope the burden I have put upon you will not be too heavy, my boy. You will not be bound in any way by any wishes of mine, for the longer I have thought about it the more deeply I have realized that this thing cannot be done in a hurry; it needs years."

An hour later Mrs. Brand found them still talking. She had acquired a general understanding that her husband meant to devote the bulk of his fortune to what might be vaguely termed philanthropical purposes, but when he had endeavored to discuss the matter with her she had utterly refused to enter into detail with him, which was really a greater relief to him than he would have cared to admit. At least he had managed to leave with her an impression of adequate provision for herself, to which she was not at all indifferent, though she felt an aversion to any exhaustive discussion of a subject that touched her with a certain sense of humiliation. There were times when she was acutely thankful that her husband could not know how little of herself she had put into the partnership that appeared to be on the point of dissolution. Just now she consciously felt herself to be a puzzle. Her days went by in a series of jerks, quite unlike the well-bred monotony of former times. But there were no more distracting interviews with Mr. Overholt. Perhaps that contributed to the restless feeling that harassed her, and which urged her perilously near the danger line sometimes, when it seemed as if she could not resist the fascination of experimenting with the pastor in public.

One day Mrs. Crumpet, who had recently lost her husband, came in to call upon Mr. Brand. It had been a dreary day, and the old man was glad of any visitor. Things went along smoothly enough in the conversational rut until Mr. Overholt and Chrys were announced. Then Mrs. Crumpet showed signs of agitation. She greeted the minister impressively, and advanced upon Chrys, whom she enclosed in an embrace that was like an applied benediction. "Don't," said the child, gravely, upon emerging, "you choke my stomach."

An expression of pain appeared upon Mrs. Crumpet's countenance. "Dear little child!" she exclaimed in large tones; "so unaccustomed to a mother's tenderness."

Mrs. Brand's lip twitched dangerously. But her husband went gravely on with the interrupted conversation, to the relief of herself and Mr. Overholt, who for once felt unequal to looking at her.

When Mrs. Crumpet had gone, and an opportunity occurred she said to him, "I heard something about you the other day."

"I should think that not impossible," he replied, with a cool assumption of indifference that she found stimulating.

She leaned her head back against her chair, and laughed softly.

"I hope this was."

Mr. Overholt said nothing. He took refuge in the ends of his moustache instead.

"It was such a new idea to me. I don't know how it would do, I'm sure." Mrs. Brand surveyed him with reflective innocence, but her eyes were dancing wickedly. "Mr. Crumpet has been dead so few months that it was really a shock to me."

"What was?" inquired Mr. Brand, with sudden interest.

Mrs. Brand beamed upon him gratefully.

"Oh, haven't I told you? Only that Mrs. Crumpet say that of course Mr. Overholt's attentions to her can be only the delicate expression of his ultimate hopes with regard to her, and that she is prepared to consider the matter after a due lapse of time."

"Well! well!" laughed Mr. Brand. "That's pretty good. Reminds me of a story Bell told me once. He and his wife had an eye on a desirable house for a long time. The man who lived there was very ill, and when he died Bell thought there was not a minute to lose. In the evening after the funeral he went in to see the widow, and apologized a great deal for intruding, but said he was anxious to make inquiries about the house. 'Oh, you're too late,' said the widow between her sobs, 'we rented it this afternoon at the grave.' It seems to me Mrs. Crumpet is equally forehanded."

Mr. Overholt's features gave way to a difficult smile, but the situation was without humor for him. The claws that he had elected to consider sheathed for him were still sharp to scratch the delicate epidermis of his pride in a most vulnerable part.

"One does not expect very much of Mrs. Crumpet," he said, frostily. "But I should not have looked for such news through the medium of Mrs. Brand."

"Why? Didn't you know how fond I am of gossip? I fairly revel in it. Besides, this would tempt the taste of an epicure. I simply scratched for details."

Mr. Brand, looking at them, had thoughts of his own that he did not utter. But he tasted with renewed appreciation the wisdom of his policy with regard to his wife. 'Twas a skittish thing, a woman. He had done well to make things sure. It was characteristic of him that at no time had he felt any doubts of the man, who was far from being a fool and keen enough to be relied upon to appreciate an opportunity. It is one thing to cherish one's own sentiments, and quite another thing to appreciate them in other people. This old money-maker, after all these years, cherished still in the core of him as his most sacred possession misty memories of things that time had turned to dust. It would have seemed to him a madness in anybody else to do likewise, to the detriment perhaps of present interests. He had never made his will before, partly from the indifference of a man who feels there is really no need of hurry, and partly from a superstitious fancy that it would be equivalent to signing his own death-warrant. And now that it was really done, this underlying fear affected him in his weakened condition more dangerously than he would have cared to own.

Chrys had escaped to more congenial quarters, and Mrs. Brand and Mr. Overholt went on talking. How tired he felt all at once! With a sigh of relief he leaned back in the encircling depths of his chair, glad to be free from any further strain of attention. For a while their voices hummed dimly in his ears, and then he floated out upon the broad and placid river of sleep. But after a time the waves grew troubled. He thought he heard the muffled roar of distant thunder. What was it? Where was he? Ah! it was Cecily and Mr. Overholt. They were talking, to be sure, about Mrs. Crumpet? No! What was the minister saying in those tones? His wife was standing, tall and stately, with eyes flashing like the diamonds on her slender fingers. It was the last time her husband ever looked at her.

"How dare you!" For a moment her passionate breath choked her utterance. Then she went on, her anger battling with the need of caution, but not a word was lost to the listener. At last she threw open the door behind her and went out.

Mr. Overholt sprang up to follow her, and Mr. Brand was left alone. He struggled to his feet, but they wavered beneath him, and he fell helplessly back in his chair. Then he tried to call aloud, but his voice broke in an unintelligible groan. His soul cried out in agony for help, but none came. He heard Chrys patter through the hall, saying in his high, sweet voice, "But can't I say good-bye to Aunt Cecily?" Then presently the clang of the outer door, and all was still.

After all, until now, life had dealt out lenient lessons to the old man. This one, coming late, was too hard.

CHAPTER X

Another hot summer had scorched its way across the Western prairies to the edge of the great lake, leaving behind it a trail of golden days, the afterglow of its fierce illumination. Children had sickened and died in the city's tenements for lack of fitting food and fresh air, and men and women had cursed the God who had forced upon them life without the chance to sustain it.

But over the face of Moon Street there was stealing a change — imperceptible perhaps to indifferent eyes, but clear enough to those who were concerned in it. John Brand had been dead nine months, but he had insured his memory in the hearts of its wretched inhabitants at compound interest. Each year would double and treble their obligation to him, and in their hitherto man-forsaken, God-bereft lives, a few of them began to realize something of this new fact. Half way down Moon Street, in the heart of its filth and degradation, there stood a square, old-fashioned house which had gone through every phase of humiliation. It caused a sensation even in Moon Street, where sensations were not rare, when one day an army of workmen took possession of this place and began an astonishing process of remodeling and renovation. Nobody ever remodeled anything in Moon Street; they simply nailed on or up or down another board. And in the matter of fresh paint there was nothing newer than a tradition. Finally it was discovered that the house was being made ready for Dr. Challoner.

"An' phwat for would ye be givin' to live there, doctor?" inquired Mrs. Flynn, blankly, feeling herself for once unequal to any strain upon her natural gift as an orator.

"Why, for the sake of being near my friends," replied Dr. Challoner, good-naturedly.

"'Tis onraisonable av ye," she said, curtly, turning on her heel on a mission of dissemination of knowledge among the ignorant, and in dire anxiety lest some hated rival should outstrip her. But presently she came panting back again.

"Shure ye'll be for bringin' a woife wid ye?"

Dr. Challoner laughed. "Well, no, not just yet, Mrs. Flynn."

That was several months ago. The house was finished now, and Moon Street had inspected it and, after revelling in the criticism of misunderstood details, had yet pronounced it good. But what did it all mean, anyway? That was exactly the question which had baffled the understanding of the owner, from whom Dr. Challoner had finally succeeded in leasing the house for three years.

"You ain't goin' to turn it into a hospital?" he asked, suspiciously. "No, no, Bill," interrupted the man with him. "He don't want to make no money out of it. I've heard say there was folks like that," he added by way of explanation, which, however, created still greater ferment in the liquor-dealing owner's mind, for he could not comprehend a sane man's indulging in so unremunerative a scheme of existence.

But after Dr. Challoner was duly installed in the new abode, his actions were even less open to interpretation than before.

"He has friends stayin' wid him now,"

announced Mrs. Flynn, excitedly. "A Mr. and Mrs. McGarvey, if ye plaze, and a rale toidy body she is, shure, and came around yisterday to invite me to dhrink tay wid herself."

It had so happened that Mr. Brand's appeal to Mr. McGarvey to become a trustee of that part of his estate which was to be used in behalf of Moon Street had come at a singularly propitious time. Mr. McGarvey had begun his commercial life as an engraver, and as the years went by his business increased so steadily that at one time it absorbed his energies to the exclusion of all outside interests. But for some years past an insidious change had been creeping over the face of his affairs. New inventions, processes unheard of one day and full-fledged for active competition the next, were heading a silent revolution in the old-fashioned arts of the engraver, and Mr. McGarvey, cautious and conservative, awoke to a tardy perception of the fact that his business was slipping away from him. He was a man of considerable means, and as his business required but little capital he had been free to invest his profits outside of it, so that there were no financial anxieties confronting him. But his industrious soul was galled at the prospect of inactivity. Just then it was that Mr. Brand stepped into his narrowing life with a new interest. He seized upon it eagerly, not realizing at first by any means that in seeking the solution of other people's problems, which they had found too hard, he was to gain the answer to his own. But in a few short months he had shaken himself free from the remaining fetters of his business, and was prepared to devote himself body and soul to the interests of Moon Street. For all his queer, slow ways, Dr. Challoner found him infinitely easier to manage than Mr. Boyington, whose restless spirit acted rather irritatingly at times upon the temper of his colleagues. But as Mr. Brand had foreseen, Mr. McGarvey was invaluable in the manipulation of Mr. Boyington, who felt for the Scotchman an awe that he had never known for any other mortal.

When the improvements in Brand House were completed, and Dr. Challoner was about to install himself in it, Mrs. McGarvey perceived a cantankerousness in her husband which time had taught her to consider portentous.

"Either Sandy McGarvey is going to be sick or he has got a scheme," she said to herself, and set about discovering which it was. It did not take her long.

"What is it you're wanting, Sandy McGarvey?" she asked him some days later. "You're better to tell me right away, because I know," she added, suggestively.

Mr. McGarvey looked at her and wisely concluded that the time was ripe to make her acquainted with his heart's desire.

"Could you do it, Beth?"

"Was there ever anything you wanted that I couldn't do, Sandy McGarvey?"

And so it was settled. "For the only way really to know anything about it is to jump right into it as Dr. Challoner has done," said Mr. McGarvey. So they were to go and stay a while with him without exhausting their energy in indefinite plans for a future that might be relied upon to define itself clearly enough when the time came. Mrs. McGarvey was a good, motherly woman whose heart still ached for her children, who had been laid away one after another out of her sight, and her imagination warmed to the idea of spending its abundant tenderness upon some of the little ones who came unwanted and unwelcomed into the teeming tenements.

Dr. Challoner and Mrs. McGarvey were friends at first sight. It was perhaps her ardent liking for "the lad" that influenced her to so easy a decision in regard to Moon Street. And as time went on he felt himself under endless obligation to her for the exercise of her administrative qualities on his behalf. She untied many a knot that he would have found puzzling, and assumed promptly the solution of the unusual domestic problems which such a venture entailed. For the first time in his life he began to cherish vague dreams of an ideal home, and to be stirred by thoughts which his familiarity with his uncle's domestic life had never suggested to him.

The utmost simplicity of style and purpose characterized the plans of the trustees at present, for under the terms of Mr. Brand's will there was to be no attempt at a final disposition of the fund that he had left at their disposal until three years after his death, in order, as Mr. Boyington said with a groan, that their ideas might become "clarified and classified." Dr. Challoner found himself at last free to sever his intermittent connection with his feeble practice in Glenedge, and to devote himself unreservedly to the work which had lain upon his conscience so long.

"The lad's got something on his mind, I'll be bound," said Mrs. McGarvey to herself one evening, as Dr. Challoner came into their sitting-room and threw himself into a chair with a sigh. She watched him furtively for a long time.

"How's Mary Gard?" she asked, at last.

"Oh, she's all right," he replied, indifferently. "Those Healy children have got scarlet fever, though."

"Now, that's too bad," exclaimed Mrs. McGarvey, mournfully. "That poor, little woman seems to be plunged from one thing into another all the time."

Dr. Challoner said nothing further, and Mrs. McGarvey sewed on in silence on the little dress she was making. But she still had a question in reserve.

"Has Mrs. Brand arrived?" she inquired suddenly with an air which she was at liberty to consider innocent. Dr. Challoner rose and shook himself preparatory to going out again.

"Yes! — yes! She got home on Monday."

"Is she looking well?" Mrs. McGarvey had no interest whatever in Mrs. Brand's appearance, but it was necessary to furnish some decent drapery for her curiosity as to whether Dr. Challoner had seen her yet.

"Yes, she is looking very well — very well, indeed, I should say. I am going out to see her now."

As he rang the door-bell that evening at Mrs. Brand's, Mr. Overholt came out. There was the swift interchange of a glance that would hardly have borne an affable interpretation, followed by brief, conventional greetings, and the two men passed on.

"There will come a time, my good Medicus," thought Mr. Overholt, with a prolonged emphasis on the final syllable that seemed to afford him relief, "when you won't march in there with the assurance which you seem to think your birthright."

Dr. Challoner found Mrs. Brand in the old, familiar sitting-room in which he had not been for so many months — not since her sudden departure for Europe with Dr. and Mrs. Bradbury immediately after her husband's death. She was sitting before the fire, for the October evenings were chill, in a little, low chair, with some pretty work idling in her hands. She had always affected to despise a needle, but after all it was an admirable weapon for a woman.

She rose impulsively to meet him, holding out both her hands in greeting. Had he been disposed to criticism, it might have occurred to him that her effusiveness was to cover some undertow of feeling, but criticism implies a place on the grand stand, and he was in the ring himself just now. After the first rapid interchange of question and reply a silence fell between them, which each one waited for the other to break.

"Tell me about your house," said Mrs. Brand, as if suddenly remembering Moon Street.

"There really isn't much to tell. You must come and see it. Would you?" He looked at her curiously.

"Would I? Why, of course I would. Wasn't I always interested in your work?" she said, with an emphasis which did not escape him.

"You always seemed to be."

Mrs. Brand dropped her work, and drew her chair nearer his.

"What's the matter with you, Bruin? What have I done to have my good, little deeds discussed and dismissed in this cavalier fashion?" She laid her hand insistently on his arm. "Something's happened to you. You don't even look as you used to. But what have I done?"

He gazed steadily at the fire for a moment, and said nothing. Then he faced her deliberately, and she felt an indefinable pang at his expression. How often she had laughed and dubbed him "shy," with a dozen careless implications in the term. But a shy person is hardly ever a coward, and, without knowing why, she quailed before the purpose in his face.

"What have you done?" he repeated, with accent at which she instinctively bridled. Then he paused, but he held her with his look. "It's no business of mine. And yet for nine months it has never been out of my head."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, sharply. "Certainly, if there is any other aggrieved party to this affair I might as well know it. But I fail to see whom it can be. It would seem that I have sufficient grounds for supposing that every harrowing expedient had been exhausted in disposing of me. I think that expresses it mildly."

"I do not think you can feel more bitterly about it than I do," said Dr. Challoner, "but I know that Uncle Brand acted only for what he believed then to be your best interests."

Mrs. Brand made a gesture of contempt. "Why do you say 'then'?" she asked. "Do you think he has changed his mind since?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you would be good enough to explain."

"I mean to."

He rose, pushing his chair back impatiently, and walked two or three times up and down the room, his hands behind his back. As Mrs. Brand watched him there came to her a sharper realization of the change in him than she had yet experienced. He was older — not with the age that comes with blight, but with that of ripened youth and vigor. In these few, short months there had come to him some potent revelation of himself of which she was aware in the altered bearing towards herself which she felt in him. She perceived this change with a curious mingling of resentment and respect. But she had no time for further speculation, for he sat down again, facing her, and began to speak with a directness for which no forewarning could have adequately forearmed her.

"I could not beat about the bush in any matter, much less in this. When Uncle John made his will I knew just as much about it as you did. I knew nothing whatever about his plans with reference to yourself. But the night of his death, when I came in here and found him alone in that terrible condition, he summoned all the strength and the will power he could force to his aid to tell me that he had made a terrible mistake. He clung to me in agony — I can never forget it — and from his broken words I gathered some idea of what he had heard." Dr. Challoner paused a moment. It was harder than he had even supposed. Mrs. Brand sat quite still, except for her hands, which he saw trembling against her black dress. He wished that he had not noticed them.

" He had overheard some conversation between yourself and — Mr. Overholt,——" the name passed his lips as if it burned them — " doubtless you remember it. I could not understand what he meant then, but of course I did when I heard the will. Had he lived, his first act would have been to change it."

Mrs. Brand sat leaning slightly forward, as she had been when he began to speak, and the poise, so light and alert, seemed as if it were caught and held in the meshes of a fate against which it would be useless to struggle. Her eyes had lifted their look to a picture above the doctor's head. Why, yes, they had bought that picture in Munich, she and her husband, two or three years after their marriage. She had admired it greatly, but had hesitated to make it part of her fixed environment. Yet the fascination of it had drawn her to the artist's studio again and again, and he had at last parted with it, though seemingly against his wish. "You are beautiful and blessed, madame," he had said, in his strange way. "Perhaps you will some day understand my picture, perhaps never. I do not know which is best."

To-night she understood. She looked only at the picture, and Dr. Challoner, impatiently waiting for some word, grew bitter as he watched her.

Suddenly her face was wet. She put up her hand to her eyes in bewilderment. A sob rose in her throat.

An instant remorse seized Dr. Challoner. He had counted on anger, affronted dignity rising imperiously to defend itself. With that he was ready to grapple, but before this silent misery he was weak. "Cecily, what is it? What can I do? I had to tell you these things."

"I know," she whispered. "But you — you have been cruel — you have thought cruel things of me."

"For God's sake, what am I to think?" he asked, wildly.

The tears came again, but she pressed them back. She had no time for that now. An extreme urgency was upon her to tell him everything. There was much that he already knew, but she began far back in her solitary childhood, and the details with which he was already familiar took on a tragic portent to him now. He shrank from her love story, but she went through it unflinchingly, sparing neither herself nor her lover. "Since then I have often felt that if I had been less absorbed in it than I was, of course I should have seen that my intensity galled him — that he was weary of it," she said, simply. She dealt with her marriage with the same ruthless candor. "Certainly I meant to tell Mr. Brand of my broken engagement, but when I began once he laughed, and said boys and girls were often sentimental, and that a woman who was going to be his wife needn't dwell on memories of that sort. I really don't think he would have cared at all then. He would have taken it as a matter of course that I might have fancied some one else until I had an opportunity of marrying him."

At another time Dr. Challoner might have smiled at the pathetic irony of her remark. It seemed too pitifully true for that now.

"That is all," she said, at last. "I dare say you will wonder, though you will not ask me, what my attitude is towards Mr. Overholt now. At present I have none." The color had come back to her face, and she lifted her chin with the proud gesture Dr. Challoner knew so well in her.

"You are mistaken in supposing I have nothing to say about that man," he began, deliberately. "You have spoken of my thinking cruel things of you. That conversation which Uncle John overheard — have you nothing to say in explanation of that?"

"Nothing whatever!" she exclaimed, stung into sudden humiliation and defiance by his unconsciously judicial manner.

They sat in silence for some minutes. Then she turned on him, the smoldering wrath of months bursting into fierce flame. "How dared he," she began, her breath coming in short gasps of anger, "how dared he presume to dispose of me, as if I could be bought or sold at his good pleasure!" For by the terms of Mr. Brand's will she was to inherit an absolutely clear five hundred thousand dollars if she married within a year and a half of his death. If she did not, she was to receive merely three thousand dollars a year from the trustees of the estate.

"What is the use of dwelling on it?" said Dr. Challoner, bitterly. "Like many other wise men, Uncle John made a fool of himself when it came to making his will. No such will would stand in any court of law. There is no reason why you should not break it."

"I! Break it! Oh, no," she said, proudly. "I will never drag my affairs through a court."

"After all, however outrageous as it seems, he only made that will for the sake of securing your happiness. He had a great opinion of Mr. Overholt — at that time. But we are talking to no purpose, Cecily. You are face to face with your future. You say, as you said at first, that you will never break the will. There is something else I hope you will say with equal decision." He looked at her squarely, unflinchingly. The color rose in her face, flooding it with crimson tumult.

"If you do not, you will make shipwreck of your life."

She went over and knelt down in front of the fire, holding out her cold hands to the blaze. There was a forlornness in her attitude, and a pathos in her severely black dress, with its white bands and collar, that seemed painfully illustrative of her bereft condition. Dr. Challoner had never realized before how alone she was in the world. Yet he thought he understood the defiance with which she had assumed the flaming bunch of geraniums at her belt. "Poor child!" he said, softly. She turned swiftly towards him, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Oh, Arthur, you don't know how hard it is. You don't know anything about it. After all, one is but an atom in the path of Fate."

"Oh, no, no!" He spoke with vehemence, his voice hardening resistently as the image of Mr. Overholt rose before his mind. "That is a fatal way of thinking. You must never fall into it." How difficult it was to talk to her! He must get away and think it all over — these revelations that the evening had brought to him were bewildering, and he was desperately afraid of being betrayed into undue speech. Reluctantly he looked at his watch.

“Ten o’clock. I must be off, for I have some children I promised to see to-night.”

“When will you come again? You don’t know how lonely it is,” she said, wistfully.

“Soon, Cecily. But you must come and see us — often. You would like Mrs. McGarvey.”

The tears were in her eyes again. Was it that the “us” grated on her proscriptively? Dr. Challoner felt troubled.

CHAPTER XI

"Mrs. Brand will come to lunch with us to-morrow," said Dr. Challoner one day to Mrs. McGarvey.

"There, now! Didn't I tell you that all she wanted was the asking, and if she comes once she'll come again without that."

"Why?"

"Because it's like a spell — the tenements, I mean. I don't believe that any thoughtful man or woman who ever went through this district could ever live again in indifference to it. I don't mean to say that every one who comes to see Moon Street ought to stay and live here, though I sometimes think I shall have to. But life can never be the same again after all this misery has photographed itself on any one's conscience. There, now! Isn't that quite an oration? But it's just what I think."

This announcement of Mrs. Brand's approaching visit threw Mrs. McGarvey into quite a flutter. She had, of course, heard Mr. Brand's will in relation to his wife discussed a great many times, but she had never seen Mrs. Brand. With the rest of the world she had plausibly concluded that Dr. Challoner was the man whom Mr. Brand designed to benefit under the conditions of his will, and, naturally enough, the longer she knew him, and the more attached she became to him, the greater was her curiosity as to what manner of woman it might be who provoked sane men to the doing of things inexplicable.

"Now, my dear," said Mr. McGarvey a little pettishly, when his wife, in his opinion unduly excited by the prospective visit, began to discuss the matter anew in all its bearings, "I've told you before that the person who has most cause to complain in this affair is Mrs. Brand herself." He had wound himself up and down so many times in contemplation of the matter that he was really growing weary of the exercise in that particular connection.

"Yes, of course, that would be so if she was a nice woman," said Mrs. McGarvey, with the vigor of conviction, "but Mrs. Boyington says she is so proud and self-contained that you daren't even refer to her affairs."

"Seems to me that's the best thing I've heard about her yet," remarked Mr. McGarvey, stolidly.

This ineffective-looking Scotchman had applied himself to a practical comprehension of the political details in his ward with an undemonstrative pertinacity which boded no peace to the settled order of things when he should once have sifted and assorted the data he was so patiently collecting. So the next day it happened that he was absent following a trail "which led to Hell," as he himself expressed it. When he returned in the evening he saw at once that his wife was in a state of mental inflation that demanded relief.

"Well, did she come?" he asked, to afford a safety valve. He was very tired, and could have enjoyed a quiet half-hour with his pipe just then, but in his thirty years of marital apprenticement he had acquired a diplomatic scent which he was occasionally betrayed into using.

"Come!" exclaimed his wife, explosively. "I should say she did, and Sandy McGarvey, don't you ever again let a soul say a word to you about her."

This was rather sweepingly prohibitive, and Mr. McGarvey laid down the evening paper which he had picked up for furtive perusal, with a sigh of renunciation. What was coming now?

"Proud! Why, she hadn't been here five minutes before she sat down to help me with these shirts I'm making for the Schmolze boys. Though I don't think she knows much about gussets, I must say." There was a sub-vocal effect about this remark which Mr. McGarvey wisely concluded to denote something unfit for his ears. "And we had just the nicest talk. She wanted to know all I could tell her about the people in the tenements, and sometimes the tears were in her eyes, and sometimes they were in mine. And to think of me worrying all this time because I thought he was going to marry her and couldn't love her. Love her! Why, he doesn't know whether he's in the body or out of it when he's near her. He just floats straight off to Paradise."

"How do you know that?" inquired her husband, an obnoxious taint of scepticism in his tone.

"How do I know when the fire burns? Or when the sun shines?" retorted his wife, with fine scorn. "How did I know when you fell in love with me yourself, Sandy McGarvey."

"Because I told you so," said he, stoutly.

"Not a bit of it. You don't suppose it took me all that time to find out what was the matter with you?"

"Then, of course, Mrs. Brand understands the situation perfectly?" he asked, not without malice aforethought.

"Ah, now, there it is!" exclaimed his wife, in a tone of despair. "For, would you believe it, I don't think she has the least idea of such a thing. The trouble is, she knows him too well to know him differently."

"She's a very pretty woman," said Mr. McGarvey, rashly and irrelevantly.

"Pretty! There isn't a pretty thing about her." Mrs. McGarvey's face expressed genuine surprise at this. "She's just like a queen masquerading round without her crown on. No, she isn't pretty, but a pretty woman would stand no chance beside her. When she's happy she's beautiful."

"Isn't she happy, then?"

"No, she's miserable," said Mrs. McGarvey, with decision. "And how could she be anything else with such an insulting will as that hanging over her head. When she said good-bye to me she kissed me —"

"I don't wonder at that," interposed Mr. McGarvey, unguardedly, whereupon his wife threw him a withering glance — "Just like a child, and said she would come again soon. She hadn't had such a happy day for years."

"Did she go through the tenements?"

"Yes, but I didn't see her again after that. Dr. Challoner took her around himself. I happened to tell her about Trixy Gaynor, and it stirred her all up. I don't believe she's ever come in contact with real, aching misery, and I thought it would give her something to think about."

"'Tisn't any good to expect to influence people by spelling misery at them with ever so big an M. You want to bring them into direct contact with somebody whose life is ruined by the big M, Personalization versus Generalization," said Mr. McGarvey, philosophically, and as he hoped conclusively.

While they were thus discussing her, Mrs. Brand was sitting quietly at home before her cheerful fire. She was very tired. She had climbed more stairs that day than she had done since she was a weary little item in the schools which are the nation's pride. But it was not the remembrance of the stairs that oppressed her now. From time to time she scanned her pretty room and its exquisite appointments with a scrutiny which found no satisfaction in its perfect harmony of color and design. For her mind was busy setting it in sharp contrast to that other room, whose furnishings it required no effort of memory to recall. Think of a girl, young and still pretty, lying there day after day alone, facing in desperation the insidious approach of that which she dreaded most! But what joys had life brought her that she should still crave it? Think of it — to be but twenty, and to have swept the tragic gamut of human sin and suffering! To be but twenty, and to curse God for having made man in his own image!

"Would you mind waiting here just a moment?" Dr. Challoner had said, pausing before a certain door, after he had conducted her hither and thither, chiefly in explanation of the various plans which the trustees had under consideration. "I must run in for a moment to see a sick girl."

"Let me go in with you," said Mrs. Brand, quickly. She divined that this was Trixy Gaynor's room.

Dr. Challoner hesitated. "I don't know," he said, doubtfully. "She is very proud, and would resent any intrusion of her privacy as much as you would yourself."

"I know. But do let me go in. It's Trixy Gaynor, and I want to see her. Don't stand arguing!" She gave him a little push, to which he weakly yielded, and they went in.

"Well, Trixy," he said, cheerfully, as he went over to the bed. "How goes it to-day? Mrs. Brand and I were passing, and I brought her in with me, for I shan't be coming this way again to-day."

But Trixy answered nothing. She lay, propped up as well as might be by two small, hard pillows, on her still harder bed. Her lips were tightly drawn in an unlovely line, and her eyes flashed angry defiance at Mrs. Brand. For Trixy hated a "lady," and Mrs. Brand's bearing was a fatal witness against her. She knew them, with their pharisaical ways and pious drivelings! But she had settled the last one who had come to pray at her, and she had not lost her grip on the method yet.

Mrs. Brand sat down upon a rickety chair beside the dull window, and looked out upon the dirty street where dirty children monotonously screamed themselves hoarse for lack of anything else to do. She had assimilated Trixy's attitude toward her in an instant, and knew that, however great her interest might be in the girl, there was no opportunity at present of manifesting it. She must obliterate herself as much as possible while Dr. Challoner rearranged the medicines, and gave his directions about them.

But all at once she jumped excitedly from her seat. "Oh, look, look! He will pound that little fellow to death. Run down, quick!"

Dr. Challoner calmly crossed over to the window, but after looking down a moment he ran out, and they heard his footsteps clattering rapidly over the uneven stairs.

"There! He has got him. Shake him hard! The great, mean coward! You poor little bit of a boy!"

Trixy watched Mrs. Brand curiously, the hard lines around her mouth softening a little.

"Now, I hope you're satisfied," said Dr. Challoner, tolerantly, as he came breathless into the room again. "I banged the big fellow nicely, and sent the little chap home to his mother, and he's got a good one, so you needn't lie awake to-night thinking about it. Now, Trixy," he went on, turning his attention to his patient again, "have you been taking this medicine regularly?"

"Yes, sir,— that is, as well as I could." What a pretty voice it was!

"As well as you could! I wonder how well that was with a clock that's stopped. What's the matter with it? When did it stop?" He wound it, and shook it, and dosed it with epithets, but all to no purpose, for it remained unmoved by all his appeals.

"It stopped last night. Emmy said she was afraid it wouldn't be worth repairing."

"Whew! This will never do. You must have your medicine regularly." He looked about him in perplexity, as if to evoke timepieces from the atmosphere.

"Here, take my watch," said Mrs. Brand. "Trixy can keep it till I come again. Do, please!" She held it out with a smile, and Trixy, wondering, uncertain, caught the flash of diamonds. "Why, it's dreadful to think of your taking your medicine, hit or miss, in that way. See, I will wind it for you, and then you will know all about it."

Trixy said nothing, but suddenly she stretched her hand out with the artless gesture of a child eager for some new toy. Just think of it, to have that lovely, gleaming thing beside her all through the long, long day when Emmy was at work, and the silent hours seemed endless, and she grew to hate the white walls that shut her in with her lonely thoughts.

"What time does Emmy get home, Trixy?" asked Mrs. Brand, with a natural assumption of intimacy that made Dr. Challoner check an amused smile.

"About half-past seven, ma'am."

"Dear me! That's a long time!" said Mrs. Brand, softly. "What do you do when it gets dark?"

"Just wait, ma'am."

"What would you do?" asked Dr. Challoner, looking at Mrs. Brand.

She hesitated a moment. Then she said, vehemently, "What should I do? Just get —— wild!"

Trixy laughed, quaveringly perhaps, but nevertheless in real echo of the happy laughter which had once rippled so readily from her young throat. This kind of sympathy was new and sweet to her. She understood it better than prayers. But looking up at Mrs. Brand, she saw that her eyes were full of tears.

Trixy never looked at the diamonds around the watch again without thinking of that. This was the experience insistently rehearsing itself to Mrs. Brand as she sat alone that evening, surrounded by every luxurious trick of wealth. What were her own troubles in comparison with that girl's misery? Trixy's face and manner haunted her;

perhaps she was dimly conscious of a nature there akin to her own. What could one do for the girl? She sat a long time thinking. It was not as simple as it seemed when she stood beside the bed with the proffered watch in her hand. For not all the treasures of time could buy back for Trixy the heart of childhood, or wipe away from her life the stain of sin. Wealth — it was an impotent thing.

Mrs. Brand leaned back in her chair and shivered — just as she had shivered in the church a year before. It was for wealth, that cruel travesty of human weal, that she was giving herself up to be driven on to the rocks of a future in which she had no faith. Generally she managed to elude a crisis with her conscience, but to-night it held her in its clutch, and she shrunk affrighted from its stern arraignment of her weaknesses.

Why had she come home at all? He would have sought her out anyway; she knew that. But that was not it. She had come because the temptation to dare her fate was irresistible. What was the secret of his fascination for her? Must she seek it in herself?

The image of her husband rose before her, setting her veins aflame with indignation. For months after she had first heard his will read she had resolutely closed her mind to any contemplation of it. But that attitude was necessarily a temporary one, and when she once began to contemplate, she amply atoned for her delay.

"Why don't you come to church?" Mr. Overholt inquired, when calling on her one afternoon, some weeks after she had first seen Trixy. It happened that Chrys was staying with her, and, weary from hours of active play, he had fallen asleep in her lap. She had tried to keep him awake, for in his unending interrogatory fusillade there was safety for her.

"Why should I?" she answered, indifferently. "I don't care anything about the Church of the Pilgrims."

"Nor about its minister?" he asked in cool, even tones, a smile in the dark, blue eyes audaciously bent upon her.

"Why should I?" she asked.

"Then you admit that the question is open to argument?"

"No. I don't admit anything."

"I think you are wise," he retorted, with a careless, little laugh. "That is always the safer plea in any case, innocent or guilty."

"Innocent or guilty?" she repeated, spurred into argument against her better judgment. "What do you mean?"

"Wait a moment. That child is too heavy for you. Let me slip a cushion under your arm, if you won't let me lay him down on the divan."

"No, you may put him down." Perhaps the child would kindly awaken under the transfer, and so save her from the situation into which her rashness had betrayed her.

"Just as you wish," said Mr. Overholt, so gently that she instantly felt that her remark had been misinterpreted.

But Chrys did not awaken. He relinquished his fat little body to the easier position with a deep sigh of satisfaction, and his father sat down opposite Mrs. Brand. He was acutely conscious of the difficulties of his position.

But the strain was becoming prolonged. Under the stress of it his sermons were losing some of their savor. The easy confidence with which he had addressed himself to his task when Mrs. Brand first returned home was deserting him. There were pernicious influences at work about her. Dr. Challoner was quite as anxious as he was himself to appropriate the "unearned increment" which his uncle had so manifestly intended for him, conditioned as it was on the acceptance of a wife worthy to be courted for herself alone. It irritated him to think that the old man's object in making so dense a will became no clearer to him with the lapse of time, and Mrs. Brand had never yielded him so much as a hint in regard to the matter. Her recent astonishing display of interest in Moon Street seemed to him in very bad taste, for he was quite certain that she cared no more for those abominable tenements than he did himself. She was not the kind of woman who fell a victim to enthusiasms. Perhaps, after all, these things which worried him most were but the final flings of power before abdication. Of course she meant to marry him. It was easy to define her attitude toward Challoner. She might use the fellow as a cats-paw, to be sure, but why shouldn't she?

In the meantime he chafed under the difficult distance she had set for him since her widowhood. Considering the various episodes between them this seemed absurd. There was a sphere in which a man, properly enough, contented himself with ocular tastes of his passion, but the alluring charm which Mrs. Brand possessed for him rendered this pastime increasingly difficult. As he diagnosed his case he felt a thrill of gratification at the extent of her hold over him. It would be a novel and exhilarating experience to be passionately in love with his wife; he was feverishly eager to enter upon it. He was weary of this prolonged parrying of the point at issue with weapons which had grown perilously fine by over-practice.

"Haven't you a cigar about you?" inquired Mrs. Brand, reasoning that if a man had a cigar he was not likely to yearn altogether for something else.

"Yes, I have," replied Mr. Overholt, "but I don't wish to smoke it."

By one of those nervous contradictions of intention which betray even the best regulated at times, she looked at him squarely, and the gravity of his direct gaze met her like an electric shock.

"Perhaps I should not have spoken as I did just now," he began, quickly, "but really, I sometimes wonder just how clear your conscience is in regard to me."

"My conscience!" Why could she not throttle that sneaking, little tremor in her throat?

"Yes, your conscience. Don't you understand what I mean?"

She made no reply.

"Well, to speak plainly ——" He hesitated, for he had not the least idea what to fill in with next, his prearranged ideas vulgarly deserting him —— "tell me, is it nothing to you, this long, patient struggle I am bearing for your sake without a word?"

Mrs. Brand rose from her chair in undisguised agitation, with an imperious intention to refuse the subject her consideration.

"No, you must listen to me," said Mr. Overholt. "A man cannot go on indefinitely as I have been doing, and you know that I have refrained from any expression of my feelings simply out of deference to what might be your wishes. But do you think that I can keep from making comparisons between what is and what might be? Do you think that I can come here, feeling towards you as I do, and see my child so happy with you, loving you as he loves no one else, and then go back to my home without any bitter sense of contrast? Would you have any regard for me if I could?"

Thus far he had spoken with an admirable air of self-repression, but now his voice betrayed an emotion which was, perhaps, the most genuine sensation he had experienced for years. "But it is not that — no thought of my loneliness, or of my child even, which forces me to speak to you to-night. It is because I love you — because you are to me what no other woman ever has been, or ever could be." He was beginning to revel in his emotions now, just as he did when preaching, and he was so accustomed to carrying his audience with him that it was like a blow to him when Mrs. Brand threw back her head and laughed. She had dreaded this ordeal so much, but now that it was actually presented to her she felt herself easily mistress of the situation.

"How can I help laughing?" she said to him, with a charming air of confidence. "Really, you must never make love to me. I couldn't possibly take it seriously, you know." She laughed again.

Mr. Overholt bit his lip, and was silent. And he kept silent so long that Mrs. Brand felt herself growing unexpectedly nervous. At last he turned to her eagerly. "Have you a pen and some paper at hand?" he said. "One of those sudden Heaven-sent inspirations for a sermon has come to me. You wouldn't mind my writing it out here, would you?"

"I should be charmed," she said, drily, as she found him what he required. Then she sought her own work, and vagrantly applied her needle to its detriment in the quiet hour that followed. She vainly hoped that some visitor or some domestic would call her away, and so relieve her humiliation. Mr. Overholt wrote rapidly, and when he had covered several pages he asked whether he might read them to her. Though she was really too angry now to take kindly to homiletics, he seemed serenely unaware of this, and, in spite of herself, after several unheeded sentences, she yielded to the spell of his special gift.

"How will that do?" he asked. "It's the close of my sermon for next Sunday morning. You can't think how it has bothered me."

"It will do," she said, simply. "I heard Mr. Boyington describe one of your sermons the other day as a 'cerebral ecstasy.' I am afraid you will bankrupt his vocabulary this time."

Mr. Overholt laughed. "That's Boyington. But he will always be equal to any emergency. And now, to go on just where we left off just now, if you remember." This matter-of-fact method of resuming a crisis took her breath away. "There are several things I must set straight for you. I have no defence to offer for the youth of a past decade. But am I always to be judged by the follies and mistakes of those times? Is there no such thing as development? Have you nothing to regret? Can you look back now and say, 'All I ask is to be judged by what I was when I was nineteen.' I do not ask you now to listen to the boy who loved you then. But I do insist that you shall be fair to the man who offers you that which you may esteem lightly perhaps, but which is the very best he has to give."

His dignity of speech and bearing sat well upon him, and Mrs. Brand felt it would be ungenerous not to acknowledge his claim.

"Those things are past and gone, and there can be no gratification to either of us in raking up dead issues."

"Of course not," he said, quickly. "But there is something more I must say. I am quite sure I should not feel as I do now, if you were just what you used to be. I was afraid of you then; I knew that there was but little resemblance between me as I really was, and the ideal you took me for. That tormented me; I couldn't stand it. It drove me to others in whose society there was no impossible standard set for me. You were very exacting in those days."

"Am I less so now?"

"Yes. You haven't studied human nature these last ten years for nothing."

Was it all a dream? she wondered oddly, these low, seductive tones, and the fair, handsome face bending so near her own? A strange apathy came over her. Why struggle with doubt and difficulty? Why not compromise with Fate?

The early winter evening began to gather them into its shadows. The magic hour was upon them; each was conscious of its spell. To Mr. Overholt the dim proximity of the woman for whom his fancy had turned to a mature passion was rife with suggestion. An impulse arose in him, only to be repelled and rise again. If he could but take her in his arms, as he had done so many times in the long ago, she would be constrained to yield as she had done before.

"Cecily," he murmured, bending tenderly over her, his hand grasping for hers hidden in the fold of her dress. "Cecily, can we not begin again where we left off, and forget the stretch between?" But his lips so near her face filled her with alarm. There was in her yet a fierce, unconquered maidenhood that shrank from his approach. At that moment she felt again a weird dread of him.

"No," she said, drawing back. "No; we cannot begin there, nor anywhere else."

"Forgive me," he urged, repentantly. "I ought to be a better master of myself."

He rose to go, and then crossed the room to stand beside his child a moment. After a little silence he said softly, "Come here."

"I won't," an answer that sounded absurdly childish to Mrs. Brand as she uttered it, but what else could she say?

"Please come here," he repeated, with gentle insistence.

She crossed the room slowly and stood beside him looking down upon the sleeping child, who lay in the careless abandon of innocent sleep, his hair tossed in golden aureole about his head, one flushed cheek resting upon a pink little palm. Never had he looked more bewitching.

Suddenly holding out his hand to her, Mr. Overholt said with a quiver in his vibrant voice, "Good night, Mrs. Brand. I leave my boy to plead for me."

CHAPTER XII

In the calmer moments which succeeded his interview with Mrs. Brand, Mr. Overholt was not without great anxiety in regard to it. But of one thing he had at least assured himself, that whatever Dr. Challoner's intentions might be, they were not as yet an appreciable menace to his own prospects. "The fellow's an unmitigated ass," he thought, pleasantly, pausing in the preparation of a sermon on "The Sacred Honeymoon" to enjoy a little exegesis of a more personal nature than that afforded by "The Song of Solomon." "If he had been half smart, he might have raked in the entire outfit by this time, as Boyington would say."

But the anxiety he had felt concerning Dr. Challoner was now transferred to Mrs. Brand herself. He owned himself baffled by her obstinacy, for she had everything to gain by marriage with him.

He would have been gratified to know how entirely Mrs. Brand shared his opinions. She wondered why she had not promptly put a stop to argument by accepting him. She was weary of debating the matter round and round an unending circle. Certainly, she had no ambition to be a minister's wife, but she was serenely conscious of the fact that no church would be narrow-minded enough to apply to her the standards of piety they would consider binding if she were poor. As to Mr. Overholt, himself — well, she knew his faults thoroughly. She would at least be spared the inevitable discoveries contemporaneous with honeymoons. She was weary of her great house and its silences, and Mr. Overholt had builded better than he knew when he left her alone that evening with Chrys. The child was with her continually, partly at her own desire, partly from his father's policy, and each time that he returned home from one of these visits it became harder for him to go, and harder for her to part with him. Aside from the imperative charm of his own, little personality, she felt herself under bonds to his dead mother for his happiness. When he stayed with her now his little white bed was drawn up close beside her own. A few nights after her conversation with his father he suddenly awoke, crying out in terror, "Aunt Cecily, Aunt Cecily, where are you?"

"Here, darling, here," she answered tenderly, reaching out her hand for him to grasp.

"I thought God had taken you away, too," he sobbed out in his distress, and would not be comforted until he had crept into bed beside her, and, nestling close, forgot his troubles in her arms. Long after his little breast had ceased to heave with his imaginary sorrows, and his breath came and went again in even rhythm, she lay awake, wrestling with the problem which his pathetic dependence upon her was pressing home to her heart. This child loved her unreservedly, and she had more faith in his innocent affection than in his father's lurid ardor. She felt a certain pride in her perception of the fact that without her encumbrances Mr. Overholt would probably have had no desire to marry her, but she felt herself equally clear-sighted in the belief that he would be more devoted to her and her bank account than he ever could be to any other woman. Thus she was not without a calm calculation of her charms for him, financial and physical, and this temperate view of the case argued a maturity of judgment and a mellowing of experience which to her own view of herself seemed admirable. The marriage relation was replete with jack-in-the-box effects for the unwary, but she had been through all that. She had a supreme contempt for the women who constituted themselves moral thermometers for males. One could afford for men a beneficent toleration, for they were all alike, the best and the worst of them, and, after all, not wholly unlike their critics. As the wife of a prominent minister she would achieve a position considerably in advance of that which the possession of mere wealth could bestow upon her. Her long years of association with a man whose estimate of success was naturally that of a money-maker had deepened in her an inborn passion for place and power, and she was acutely conscious of the brilliant possibilities to them both of her marriage with Mr. Overholt.

Her thoughts wandered into a lighter vein. She remembered with a smile certain defects of his delivery and theatricalities of style which had offended her. With what discretion she would apply herself to their eradication! Of course, his poor, little wife had been no help to him in these respects. Few women could be. It required an unerring eye for snap, and fine sense of circumstances, to undertake the development of genius in another. And Mr. Overholt manifestly admired himself, as he was without any irritating pricks of perception as to his possibilities. But a humble man, fawning and solicitous of opinion, was a contemptible object. The thing was to play your game without showing your hand. A good rule, surely, and productive of a clear conscience — were men but cards!

No, she did not love him, but she argued it likely that she had quite as much regard for him as most wives had for their husbands after ten years of marriage, and she certainly had loved him with all the ideal fervor of her girlhood. She felt a little thrill of gratitude to him for the delicate way in which he had intimated to her his understanding of the fact that her love had been given not to himself, but to the hero of her dreams. His perception of this relieved her memory of some of its bitterest stings.

Thus she reasoned as she lay there in the stillness of the night with Chrys' curly little head upon her arm. But away beneath this babble of the surface, in the recesses of her woman's soul, there crouched a longing, deep and strong — a God-implanted instinct which she was striving to gag with the husks of worldly wisdom — this passion to be loved with the love which knows neither poverty nor riches, sickness nor health, which laughs at the limitations of time and eternity, because it holds in itself the key to immortality. She had thought herself almost persuaded, but in an unguarded moment love lifted up its protest. Tears forced themselves beneath her eyelids. Why was the way so hard for her? There was no saintly mother in the Church of the Pilgrims who would not jump at the chance of bestowing her daughter in the holy bonds of matrimony upon its brilliant pastor. So the battle waged in her heart from day to day, and she drew no nearer to a decision.

"You must wait," she said to Mr. Overholt, though she despised herself for the suspense which her irresolution entailed upon him. "I can not tell. If you care anything about it all, you must leave me alone." He elected to consider this encouraging, and proceeded to render himself unobtrusively indispensable to her, for which there were plenty of opportunities in the difficulties which perplex a woman who has always treated with the outside world by proxy, and whose theories of finance have been conditioned by the rise and fall of her pocket-book.

In the midst of all these distractions she had not forgotten Trixy Gaynor. The girl had learned to listen for the coming of the light step outside her door, and by degrees Mrs. Brand was discovering more about the real Trixy than anyone had ever known. For all the social difference between them these two women touched at so many points that the bond of sympathy which united them was not surprising.

April came with its days when the soft wind touched the tree-tops with hint of leaf and bud, and when the very ground beneath one's feet seemed to stir with the preparation of imprisoned things for escape. Even in Moon Street spring announced its advent, and pinched children ran to and fro with a gladness for which their starved little hearts knew no explanation. Mrs. Brand, on her way to Trixy, stopped for a few moments at Brand House to see Mrs. McGarvey. They talked about the girl and the weary progress of her disease.

"But she isn't like the same creature that she was six months ago," said Mrs. McGarvey.

"How is that?" asked Mrs. Brand.

"My dear, I went in to see her time and time again, and she'd just lie there staring at me with those great eyes of hers, and never saying one word. Nervous! I used to be ready to fly before I got out of that room. One day after I had gone in and fixed her up as comfortably as possible she snapped out just as I was going, 'Now get down and pray for me!'"

Mrs. Brand laughed. "Yes, I can just imagine Trixy saying that. I suppose she really wanted to thank you for your kindness. But when Trixy gets a desperate fit on, she's pretty bad."

"It isn't to be wondered at," said Mrs. McGarvey. "I don't know how you got such a hold on her. No one else could. Now, there are her flowers. It would never have occurred to me to take those dry, old bulbs and stick them into that lovely bowl right there before her eyes, and let her watch them grow."

"Oh, how sceptical she was about that," said Mrs. Brand. "She declared they wouldn't grow, and when the first tiny shoot came up she could hardly believe her eyes."

"I put my head in at the door yesterday as I was passing, and she fairly screamed at me, 'Oh, Mrs. McGarvey, come and see my lily.' She couldn't talk about anything else."

"And still, when I think of all the time and thought I've put on Trixy, it seems a pretty slow way of doing much good in the world, doesn't it?" said Mrs. Brand, wistfully.

"It's the only lasting way," retorted Mrs. McGarvey. "Depend upon it, my dear, Trixy will be a star in your crown, and except for you she would never have shone in anybody's."

Mrs. Brand smiled, but there was a veil of mist in her eyes. "At first I thought I'd like to take her home with me, and let her die in what we should call comfort. But when I came to know her better, and to see things from her point of view, I realized that her dark, little room was home to her, and that in it she felt free. Whatever I give her must have no monetary value to speak of — like the lilies."

"Has she ever told you who she was?" asked Mrs. McGarvey, abruptly.

"No, no! The other day, when I was sitting with her, she suddenly began to cry, and after a while she said, 'Mrs. Brand, if you only knew the kind of girl I've been, you would never sit here talking to me like you do.' So I said, 'Why, Trixy, I know all about it!' But she cried out, 'No, you don't know anything about it,' and then she broke into such a passion of grief that it made my heart ache."

"What did you do with her?"

"Do with her! Just cried, too — roared, in fact," said Mrs. Brand, tersely. "And when the uproar was at its very height, who should walk calmly into it but Dr. Challoner. Didn't he tell you about it?"

Mrs. McGarvey shook her head.

"Well, he must have laughed finely in his sleeve at me. But I didn't care for that. What worried me was to think how humiliated Trixy would feel. So I settled her back on her pillows, and mopped up my face in a hurry, and then I said to him, 'Oh, yes; I know you are aching to scold me for stirring Trixy up like this, and a scolding is just what I need, but I won't stand it from you.' Arthur is a blundering, old fellow, you know, but not with sick people."

Mrs. McGarvey found it difficult to accept the beneficent air of concession about this remark, but she said, quietly enough, "Yes, he's so sensitive to other people's suffering."

"That's just it. He took the hint at once, pitched into me right and left. I wasn't to be let come to Moon Street any more if I couldn't behave myself with his patients, and a great deal more. Of course, all this gave Trixy time to quiet down, and when I went away she was talking quite calmly to him."

"Have you seen him since?" asked Mrs. McGarvey.

"Yes, but he was grumpy."

"He has a great many anxieties just now."

"It wasn't that," retorted Mrs. Brand. "Mr. Overholt happened to be there, and he can't bear Mr. Overholt." It was such an odd relief to say this to Mrs. McGarvey. She felt as if she had suddenly let out a tuck in her mind, and was grateful for the lessened tension.

"Mr. Overholt!" repeated Mrs. McGarvey. "Does he often come to see you?" she inquired, with tentative audacity.

"Quite often," replied Mrs. Brand, abruptly, annoyed at the color she suddenly felt in her face. "How late it is!" she exclaimed, looking at the clock. "I mustn't keep Trixy waiting." She leaned over Mrs. McGarvey's chair. "Good-bye, mither. I don't know when I shall be in again."

But Mrs. McGarvey reached up and caught her hand. The tender quaintness of the old word touched into flame the mother-love in her heart, which spent itself in silence upon the two she loved so well, the one as much as the other now.

While she felt for Mrs. Brand a certain awe, which was quite absent from the thought of Dr. Challoner, it was a feeling with which she would not willingly have dispensed. She took a certain irrational delight in all the splendid airs of this woman, who was, after all, at her simplest and best with her.

"Dear heart," she said, "don't ever let anything come between you and the labor you have begun here in Moon Street." She kissed her solemnly, tenderly, and then without a word Mrs. Brand was gone.

Mrs. McGarvey sewed swiftly for a long time, but at last her work was forgotten in her thoughts. It was only by the greatest effort that she had controlled herself in speaking to Mrs. Brand, for what had been most dim to her had all at once become most clear, and in the wider range of view so suddenly disclosed she saw at first nothing but despair. She knew Mr. Overholt well by repute, and in the light of that knowledge she felt like a general whose pretty pen-and-ink campaign becomes a delusion and a snare in the unexpected presence of the enemy. Mr. Overholt! Why had she never taken him into account before? "To be sure, I've heard her say she had his little boy to stay with her, but I never gave the man himself a thought," she said to herself, with a feeling of unspeakable disgust at her own thick-headedness. Then she rapidly reviewed the situation from her altered standpoint. Now she understood the shadow that had fallen on Dr. Challoner. "But why doesn't he pitch in and take his chances?" she demanded of the four walls, in an energetic whisper. Well, perhaps he had. No, he hadn't. She understood Mrs. Brand well enough to convince herself of that.

With her natural impetuosity of preference or otherwise, Mr. Overholt had already taken his place in her mind as "that man," and her antipathy to him increased steadily in the same proportion that she realized his mastery of the situation. "Why, he's got everything in his favor," she groaned. "What a position she would have as his wife, and nobody could fill it as she would, as he knows well enough, I'll be bound."

When Dr. Challoner came home to lunch she studied him long and silently. There was an absence of the Machiavellian in her honest nature, and the strenuousness of her gaze impressed itself upon him.

"What is the matter?" he inquired. "Or are you just using me for a peg to hang a few thoughts on?" He looked at her with such a bright smile that her face broadened into a corresponding beam.

"That's better!" he exclaimed, but there was no chance for further conversation, for they had taking lunch with them that day, some friends of Mrs. McGarvey's, who, finding at last that their curiosity was really stronger than their disgust, had come to investigate for themselves what manner of life it might be to which she had become addicted.

"And do you — mean — to — stay — here — always?" inquired one, in a series of lingual bumps which she meant to be impressive.

"I don't know," said Mrs. McGarvey, simply. "As long as I can be useful, perhaps." A vision of this other woman's life rose up before her — a vulgar struggle for vain things. Tender pity filled her heart. "I dare say it does seem strange to you," she went on, " but I have no children, no home cares to fill my heart and hands. And then think of the children here, whom no one cares for, and the poor mothers — and the bad mothers. Some of them have said to me that they can bear it better — the suffering and the poverty — if they just know that I am here, near them, thinking about them."

" But how does Mr. McGarvey stand it? "

" Stand it! " echoed Mrs. McGarvey, briskly snapping up the words as they fell primly from the edges of her friend's thin lips. " He doesn't stand it. He just rolls over and over in it. I tell you he's taken to the politics of this God-forsaken ward just as naturally as a saloon-keeper. I shouldn't be surprised if after a while Moon Street gets some of the paving done. There's been enough money paid for it already to fill the street with pavings up to the second story."

These were not the last of such visitors. People who had never heard of Moon Street, and who would not have cared anything about it if they had, heard of Brand House, and came to inspect it much as they would have done an Insane

Asylum or a Refuge for the Morally Obtuse. They were not always civil, and sometimes forgot the respect due to a private home. Some of them examined Mrs. McGarvey doubtfully, distantly, as if she were a magazine loaded with theories which might suddenly explode upon them.

"For my part, I have no faith in these people who start things up on the bumblebee plan," she overheard one lady remark.

College students and professors, clever, hotheaded people, poor and proud enough to choose this means of exploiting themselves in a becoming mantle of unselfishness, might be expected to act thus, but that wealthy, middle-aged people like this canny Scotchman and his wife should do it was inexplicable. To take one's own good conduct as a matter of course and not of miracle seemed to some of these visitors deplorable, indeed, and a vicious depriving of the Almighty of the credit due him. But Mrs. McGarvey did not care.

As soon as her visitors had departed that day she sought her husband. "Sandy," she began, solemnly, "she's going to marry Mr. Overholt."

"Who?" demanded the bewildered man, "Mrs. Polkinghorne?"

Mrs. McGarvey appealed despairingly to the ceiling above her as a witness to this exhibition of masculine density. "Bless the man! Hasn't she a husband of her own now, not to mention poor Drew. No! Mrs. Brand. She's going to marry Mr. Overholt. There now! What do you think of that?" She swept him triumphantly with her eyes, and folded her arms, with a fine effect of resignation to the decrees of Providence.

"I hadn't thought of anything of that sort myself," said Mr. McGarvey, slowly, with a manifest groping for impartial light, "but it would be rather a nice arrangement, wouldn't it now?" He smiled experimentally at his wife's Delphic aspect.

Mrs. McGarvey refreshed herself with a deep groan, and then rushed with characteristic energy into the task of putting a point upon her husband's blunt perceptions.

"Nice! Oh, very nice! Especially for Dr. Challoner!" There was a delicate acidity in her tones, which Mr. McGarvey nimbly detected as a species of appetizer to the fluent feast about to follow.

"There, now," he said, uneasily, "I had forgotten his having some little interest —— "

"Some little interest! Sandy McGarvey, to think the day should ever come when I should hear you call the honest love of a man's heart 'some little interest!'"

"Perhaps, my dear, it's not so bad as you think. When are they to be married?"

"Married!" exclaimed Mrs. McGarvey, with the force of a bursting bomb. "Never, if I can help it. You don't suppose I'm going to sit quietly down and see that dear boy cheated out of all his rights by a smooth-tongued trickster."

"Oh, come, my dear," remonstrated Mr. McGarvey, gravely. "I really think you would find it difficult to maintain that opinion about a man like Mr. Overholt. And if they intend to get married, let me advise you to keep out of the affair."

"Oh, yes, if they really were going to get married in the end."

Mr. McGarvey looked at his wife hopelessly. "But you distinctly stated that Mrs. Brand was going to marry Mr. Overholt," he said, with an air of Christian patience in extremity.

"Never mind!" answered Mrs. McGarvey, soothingly. "A man can't be expected to understand these things like a woman. It's very easy for him to make up his mind that he'll marry her, but perhaps it won't be quite so easy for him to make her make up her mind that she'll marry him. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Mr. McGarvey, briefly and blindly as concerned Mrs. Brand and her affairs, but with a wide-eyed perception of his own and his wife's. In argument she had always shown a preference for victory.

CHAPTER XIII

Mrs. Brand turned the wind-swept corner westward in the direction of Brand House. It was a short walk from the station through a neighborhood at first respectable, and then growing more and more deplorable. At first she had been afraid to come alone, but she had travelled the ground so many times now that she had lost her early fears at the clustering groups of dirty women and sullen men, many of whom she had learned to know by name, and better. Big Jim Moriarty, who had fiercely resented the invasion by that "restocratic gang" of the neighborhood where he had hitherto reigned undisputed, had come to have a sulking liking for the woman who was the idol of his crippled boy's heart. Not that Mrs. Brand had designedly inspired this or any other feeling in little Dan Moriarty. She took an interest in Trixy, to be sure, — "because of her story," she had said prohibitively, as if to insure herself against any further extension of her sympathies. But she could not be long in Moon Street without other stories creeping to her ears, stories that made her heart burn and kept her awake at night recalling their pathetic details and bitter significance. It had been quite different in by-gone days, when she had listened with a critic's ear to Dr. Challoner's fierce recital of those things. His whole-souled indignation had been part of it all, part of that picture which she had studied with an artist's appreciation of its light and shadow. But lately she was perilously near to losing her point of view; in fact, she was in danger of becoming a part of the picture herself, so gradually and unconsciously had the circle of her sympathies widened. Little Dan Moriarty? — oh, yes, she had been kind to him.

"She talks like her throat wuz sating-lined," he said, in a burst of admiration to his father, who would not at that moment have expressed his contempt of "sating-lined throats" if the fall of a dynasty had depended on it.

It was a wild, reckless day. But the very violence of the wind-storm had tempted Mrs. Brand out into it, and as she braced herself to meet it her spirits rose defiantly. Nearing the Glenedge station she had come face to face with Mr. Overholt.

"Why, where are you going in such a wind as this?" he exclaimed, in amazement.

"Oh — anywhere, anywhere out of the world," she laughed back at him.

"You must mean Brand House, if it's to be 'out of the world,'" he said, coldly. "You can't think how much I object to your going there. I will walk over to the station with you, and I really think you had better take my arm."

But she walked on, her head high, resisting his proffered aid. Presently she turned upon him. "What right have you to object to my going to Brand House?"

"The right of any real friend of yours," he replied. They had reached the forlornly decorative space surrounding the station, and without question he took her arm to help her across it. Through the folds of her sleeve she felt the insistent pressure of his fingers, and of his ultimate intention. "Will you go into the waiting-room?" he inquired, as he released her.

"No, I hate to be stuffed in there to be stared at."

She straggled after him as he sought out a sheltered spot. "Don't trouble to wait," she said, with a polite air of dismissal.

But he remained, looking at her with an easy smile. "Don't you think," he said, "that it's rather like importing one's kitchen-ware from Meissen when you are used in this species of slumming?"

She was tracing an elaborate pattern on the dusty platform with the tip of her umbrella, and she neither answered nor looked up at him, for she felt herself growing less able to cope with him in his aggressive moods. She was charming to him at these times, when she let him infer his dawning mastery of her. He wanted her money, oh, yes, but that had become quite secondary in its allurement to the woman herself. He had begun to hunger for a sign in her of a feeling towards him answering to his own, and as he stood beside her now, outwardly calm and correct as a man of the world should be, his mind fermented with a vision of love's possibilities. But the train was on time, and his dreams were cut short by its noisy advent. As he handed her up the steps of the last car, he retained his hold until he compelled her eyes to turn for a moment to his.

So it was little wonder that she again exulted in the frenzy of the storm as she sped towards Brand House. It helped to drown the inner uproar.

"No, she isn't at home, and she won't be back until late to-night," said the young woman who answered her inquiry for Mrs. McGarvey.

Mrs. Brand turned away in deep disappointment. She had resolved at last to take Mrs. McGarvey into her confidence. Fate had evidently willed it otherwise. She was drifting into the mood in which people do what they have long struggled against with an ease which seems at the time to justify their action.

Dr. Challoner crossing the hall at that moment caught sight of her face as the door closed upon it, and in an instant he was upon the step. "Come back," he called after her. She turned round, and stood still.

"What for?"

But the wind, catching her irresolute, left her laughing and helpless against the fence, where Dr. Challoner descended upon her, and, arbitrarily seizing her, conducted her with great strides indoors, not relinquishing his hold until he planted her firmly on a chair in his office.

"Horrid little hole!" she ejaculated, and looked sniffingly about her. "One can hardly breathe for bottles."

"Oh, if you object ——" He seized her again and in spite of protest hurried her away, and made at a rapid rate for the stairs. Halfway up they met the young woman who had answered the door-bell. She shrank back, trying vainly to merge herself into the wall-paper, and when they turned at the landing, she was still there, gazing after them, in blank perplexity.

"Yes, she's new," said Dr. Challoner, "and plainly unimaginative." As he spoke he ushered Mrs. Brand into a cosy sitting-room where a bright fire was crackling cheerfully in a big, old-fashioned hearth.

"Oh, Bruin!" she exclaimed, sinking weakly into a chair. "Whatever has got into you to-day?"

"Shouldn't wonder if it was just the pure delight of seeing you," he answered, gaily, but even as he spoke the light faded out of his eyes.

Mrs. Brand had taken off her coat, and was proceeding at her ease upon a tour of inspection round the room. He looked at her hungrily. The little scene which he had surprised in Trixy's room came back to him. He stood still, remembering it.

"Oh, yes, there he is! Gone into a brown study, of course, about bones or bacteria, quite regardless of the fact that he has a distinguished visitor, and who she is or anything else about her."

"No, not exactly," he said, quietly. A longing came over him to pour it all out to her. "I was thinking ——"

"Never mind what," she said, promptly. "Something tremendous, of course, but quite inapropos, I'm sure, or you would never have made such horrible faces over it." As she spoke she turned a photograph towards him. "Do you know, I had quite forgotten this ridiculous thing." It was a photograph of herself, taken some years before. One afternoon they had been walking in town together, and as they had passed a photographer's he had reproached her with never having given him a photograph. "Come in now, and you shall have one taken to your liking," she had replied, and straightway they had marched within, giggling like two children in one of those delightful lapses from dignity into which even the most Grundy-ground of mortals are sometimes betrayed. They both laughed now at the remembrance.

"It really was a nice photograph," said Mrs. Brand, regarding it critically. "Don't you think so, Bruin?"

"I have always liked it," he answered, simply. Then, with an impetuous rush of words he added, "And I'm so glad nobody else has one like it."

"Oh, what a grasping wretch!" declared Mrs. Brand, with a light laugh. But there had crept into her eyes for a moment a startled look. Bruin had never spoken to her like that before. Of course, he liked her better than he had ever given a sign of liking any other woman, she knew that. For a while, after her return home, there had been a cloud between them, which of late, to her great gratification, had seemed to lift. It was not necessary that he should enjoy her marriage to Mr. Overholt, but it was imperative that he should remain her friend. She set the photograph back on the mantelpiece with a little sigh.

"Oh, dear! how long ago that seems. We're getting old, Bruin." She sat down before the fire, and as she talked she began unconsciously massing all her rings on one finger, an old trick of hers at which he had often laughed. But he watched her slender hands now with a hunger in his heart which was every moment more unendurable. All these familiar gestures, the multitude of imperious little airs with which she had always manipulated him, — who could know and love these things in her as he did, just because they were hers? And who had divined as he had the yet unsounded depths of her nature, the hidden sweetness of it, waiting for some magic touch to unseal it?

She was talking about all sorts of things, and he found himself answering her with a dull wonder at the double-mindedness which sustained him in his inner and his outer role.

All at once she held her hand out to him. "Look! Just see what I've done!" It was a ring which had gone willingly enough where it did not belong, and now refused to come back. Mrs. Brand was as absurdly frightened as a woman always is under such circumstances.

Dr. Challoner tried to draw it off, but it would not come. Then he went into an inner room, and came back with a bit of soap and a damp towel. He took her hand again, and in a moment the ring was off. She dried her wet finger, and he sat opposite her, slowly polishing the ring. At last he looked up. "Which finger does it belong to?" he asked. She had meant to take it from him, but in answer to some strange tone in his voice she silently held the finger towards him.

He leaned over, slipping the ring back in its place. But that done, he did not let her hand go, and looking in his face with a sudden thrill of fear, she understood.

"Oh, don't, Bruin," she cried out. "Don't —

you will break my heart." It was the last time she ever called him Bruin.

"But I shall," he said. "I have a right to love you." He dropped her hand and rose up, tall and strong before her. She rose, too, and they stood confronting each other, she with her face pale, her eyes full of tears, and he with his brain swayed by his urgent heart. "Can't you see it had to be? I know that I have always loved you. When it seems less strange — when you have had time to think about it —— "

But she shook her head. "No, no, Arthur. You are the best friend that I have in the world, but I don't love anybody. I never shall."

"Ah, wait!" he exclaimed, eagerly. "I would have said that, too, not long ago. If you will only let me love you — it will come to you, too."

"No, no," she said, miserably. "Don't you see how it is? You only marry a person whose friendship you will lose if you don't." She laughed dismally.

"Will you marry a man on that ground?" he asked, quickly. She hesitated. She was thinking of things remote, which her own remark had suggested to her. "Because if you will, you had better marry me, for I swear —— Oh, Cecily," his voice broke in appeal. He could not argue it with her. His heart was in too helpless a tumult.

But an impatient sense of injury stirred Mrs. Brand. A new, miserable complication had arisen to buffet her. That Arthur should act so — good sensible Arthur — it was too trying. For she realized his sincerity only too well. She could not possibly doubt that he loved her, and she shrank from the thought of the suffering before him as if it were destined for herself.

"Why have you done this?" she demanded of him, in futile remonstrance.

"Great Cæsar!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I like it?"

Turning away from him in utter wretchedness she began to draw on her coat. "It's getting late; I must go home."

He watched her silently, until the last button on her glove was fastened. Then he went over to her. "Is this the last, Cecily? Are you really going away from me, out of my life?" His voice was hoarse, and his face, always so strong and eager in its outlook upon the world, was haggard.

"The end? Why, of course not. How could it be? You will soon think so differently. Don't you see, Arthur ——" She looked appealingly into his eyes with the feeling for him in her heart that a mother has for her child and it's hurt. Why should a man take such pains to seek deliberately his own undoing? But her tenderness was short-lived, for with the touch of her light hand upon his arm she had wakened into mastery feelings over which for the moment he had no control, and suddenly she found herself in his arms, those strong arms that held her like a vise, with his kisses on her lips, kisses which fell fiercely upon them more like blows than caresses. And then as suddenly as he had taken her to himself he released her, saying roughly, "I will take you to your train."

But she faced him indignantly. "How dared you ——"

"How dared I? You bet I dared. A man doesn't need to figure out that there are some things he can have for the taking, but not for the asking."

"I will not walk to the train with you," she cried.

But he only replied, coolly, "Yes, you will." And she did.

The storm seemed to have increased in violence, and once outside she was meekly submissive to the strength which protected her. There were critical corners to be turned, where she clung to him tightly, glad enough, too, of his firm grasp of her. They went along in silence. At the station he found her train, and a comfortable seat for her, but when she turned to bid him good-bye with a politely neutral air, he was gone. He passed the window without looking up, and she followed him with her eyes across the platform towards the steps with an added sense of outrage at his wantonly abrupt desertion of her.

Long afterwards Dr. Challoner wondered how he reached home that evening, but his memory made no response to his demands upon it. Hours later he came to a miserable consciousness of himself, alone in the gathered darkness, staring into the whitening embers of the fire which seemed to him like his own dulled soul, whence all the radiance of energy and enthusiasm had gone. By degrees his misery defined itself more clearly to him; he began to grope after details. His thoughts went back in bitter retrospect to those early days of perfect harmony and ideal interchange of sympathy between himself and Mrs. Brand, which might so easily have deepened into that other and most sacred form of friendship. "My wife! My wife! She might have been that; she would have been that," he repeated, in desolate alternations of despair. But to feel that each moment bore her on a retreating tide — away from him — whither? Alas! he knew too well.

The weak spot in her — yes, he was aware of it, but he had not loved her because he thought her perfect.

He was familiar enough with the sight and sound of physical suffering, but agony of this kind was new and strange to him.

Through the long night, when the wind had sunk into silence, Mrs. McGarvey heard and grieved over the pacing of the feet above her head.

When the first red streaks of dawn flushed the sky he crossed to his window, and watched the warm glow of the East spreading itself over the sky. The stars paled before the approaching sun; the shadows of the night slunk out of sight. And with this new day there dawned for him a nobler mood. His work! Perhaps it needed from him a yet deeper consecration — an entirety of self-surrender of which he had as yet but little conception. These poor brethren of his, into whose drink-cursed, crime-stained lives he had come with sympathy and with belief in better things for them — in this extremity of his own bitterness his mind turned to them with a consciousness of their claims on him in far vistas of opportunity.

But nothing could blot out for him the memory of those never-to-be-regretted moments when he had held her in his arms.

The days that followed were days of much perplexity to Mrs. Brand, not that she suffered from doubts as to her ultimate course, but she found herself unable to arrange a future which should harmoniously include Dr. Challoner, whom she still felt to be a necessity. She wrote to him a good many times asking him to come and see her, but she destroyed the notes before the ink on them was dry. For she could not think what she should say to him after he should have come. So it was quite by accident that she encountered him one morning in a crowded store, where he was searching the book counter. She was not aware of his proximity to her until she heard some one say, "There's Dr. Challoner! Now you can take a good look at him. Isn't he a fine-looking fellow?" She turned a critical eye upon the two young women behind her "stylish, pert creatures," she decided austerely, and then after a moment of irresolution she crossed over and spoke to him. He looked around at her without surprise, for he had seen her some minutes before.

"Can I speak to you presently?" she asked, not without a sudden trepidation, for there was in his manner a certain aloofness, a detachment from her and her interests which immediately impressed her.

"Certainly," he replied, with an air of distant deference to her wishes, which she thought odd, "if you will wait one moment until they bring my book."

She lingered on the edge of the crowd until he appeared slowly making his way out of it. "Let us go to the balcony on the second floor," she said, as they started off, aimlessly. "One can nearly always find a quiet spot there."

But once there she wondered a little wildly what was to come next, for Dr. Challoner looked steadily in front of him with an evident intention of silence which she found most embarrassing. It really seemed to her that if she was willing to overlook his action he ought at least to evince some anxiety about it. To be quite honest, she had found difficulty in convincing herself of her own magnanimity, for though she had labored to induce a sense of outrage over those kisses, her efforts had always ended in a smile of which she tried to remain morally unconscious. After all, it had only been Arthur.

But it was not right of him to sit there so indifferent to the indignation he might justly expect from her. "If you haven't anything to say to me, Arthur," she began, in desperation at his silence, "we really need not prolong — "

"Are you going to marry Overholt?" he inquired, with paralyzing directness.

"What business is that of yours?" she asked, stung into challenge by this unexpected forcing of her hand.

He looked at her steadily, almost contemptuously, for a moment. Then he turned from her with a fierce gesture. "It's the money — that accursed money," she heard him say.

"I think you assume a great deal in your ignorance," she said, hotly. "If it was merely a question of money with me there are other men I might marry besides Mr. Overholt."

"Not me," he said coolly. "I'd never take you with such a string as that tied to you."

She was furious, especially as she knew perfectly the truth of what he said. She made a movement to rise. But Dr. Challoner had something further on his mind. "Wait a moment," he said; "there is another thing I want to say. I should never forgive myself if I did not ask you — if I did not warn you against the future you are choosing." He spoke severely, judicially; it was his only protection against the misery of his position. He must, cost what it might of his own slender store of peace, tell her what he could, that he might not have to reproach himself with her probable unhappiness. Surgeon as he was, it seemed to him that he was called upon to preside at his own dissection, for every moment of this interview was torture to him.

"There are things I know and things I suspect about Mr. Overholt which I am not able to tell you of. But they are serious enough for you to put an end to this matter before it goes any farther."

She looked at him with an irresistible, little smile.

"It is too bad you can not tell me what these unspeakable things are; I should appreciate something a little more definite."

"Can't you understand that I may have knowledge about which my conscience will not let me speak?"

"No, I can not," she answered, obstinately. "I have no sympathy for the affectation which shuts your lips at a time that you pretend to consider so serious a crisis for me."

Dr. Challoner rose from his seat. "Is your carriage waiting for you? May I see you to it?" he asked, in a manner suggestive of utter remoteness of interest between them. As he was about to close the carriage-door, he paused a moment, leaning forward, his foot upon the step. "Do you call yourself a good woman?"

"I? Oh, no, certainly not. Seriously, no. I cannot imagine anything more stupid."

She faced him with defiance of manner and pose, and that was the memory of her which he bore away.

CHAPTER XIV

With her conscious ability for playing Providence in other people's lives, Mrs. McGarvey found these days a weary drag upon her patience, and she was nearly driven to suspect a mortifying lack of omniscence in herself. Mrs. Brand had not been to see her for some weeks, and as for Dr. Challoner — she had never known him so unapproachable. At last she could bear it no longer.

"Why doesn't Mrs. Brand come here any more?" she asked him, one day.

"Mrs. Brand? Oh, I don't know." But a moment later he added, with reluctant honesty, "Yes, I do," and then was silent.

"Can't you tell me what's gone wrong with you both, laddie?" she asked, with a broadening of her heart and accent to his sorrows. "Sometimes an old woman can help a bit. It's the minister, I know, who's making all the trouble." She nodded her head at him with ponderous sagacity, and in spite of his instinctive dread of sympathy he said with a forlorn smile, "How did you get on to that?"

"Eyes and ears," she replied, tersely. "I warrant you I know a good many things that you'd be the better for knowing yourself. Have you ever asked her to marry you?"

Dr. Challoner hesitated. "I don't know," he said slowly. "She knows I love her."

"Now does she, really?" said Mrs. McGarvey, with an inspiring, little nip in her voice. "However did she find that out?"

"Because I told her," he retorted, stoutly, aware of the insidious attack that was being made upon him.

"Dear me!" remarked Mrs. McGarvey, in an innocent, meditative tone. Then with sudden alacrity, "Once?"

"Once — and why not once?" asked Dr. Challoner, with a fiery eye upon her.

"How often has Mr. Overholt asked her, I wonder."

"That miserable hound!"

"Yes, that's just what he is," said Mrs. McGarvey, "but I think it's likely he knows a thing or two about the business he's in." She looked at Dr. Challoner with shrewd kindly eyes. "A woman likes to be won," she remarked, suggestively.

Dr. Challoner kicked the table leg viciously. "Well, that's all no use now."

"Why?"

"Because she is going to marry him."

"Has she told you so?"

"I guess so," he said, wearily. "Don't you see there was never any chance for me. Mr. Overholt is the man her husband intended her to marry —" such a remarkable expression made its appearance on Mrs. McGarvey's countenance that he paused abruptly for an explanation of it.

"No," she protested vehemently, "no, my dear lad, it was you that he meant."

Dr. Challoner laughed. "But Uncle John told me so himself, and Mrs. Brand knows that," he said, with an amused perception of the fact that he was evidently cutting Mrs. McGarvey's most cherished theories to pieces before her eyes.

She looked the picture of despair, but after a few terrible moments she rallied bravely. "I simply wouldn't bear it," she declared, belligerently.

"I must," he said, quietly. "You see she knows that I would never marry her under those conditions. I don't want my wife to be my patroness. If she ever came to me she would have to let all that go."

"You expect a great deal. You expect a woman to give up the luxuries and habits that have become second nature to her, and what do you offer in return?"

"What do I offer in return?" he repeated, vehemently. "The best that any man can ever give to any woman, something never bought or sold in the market-place."

Mrs. McGarvey sighed. "Dear lad, I will not quarrel with you any more." She looked at him with her eyes full of tears. The discipline of life — was it a good thing? At this moment she rebelliously thought not. "It's all very well to talk about developing character, but this will leave a hard spot in his heart where there ought to be a tender — the most tender."

"Happiness —" she began.

Dr. Challoner broke in impatiently, "Happiness? Is there such a thing as mere happiness? No. It's all a question of character." Hard lines came and went about his mouth as his face followed the workings of his mind. But all at once it softened pathetically; his eyes glowed mistily. "Ah, if you knew her as I do — no, I don't mean her faults — I mean all that she really is and could be if she would only give herself a chance. But she has never had any. Her life has been so warped and blunted. Poor child! She has never had a taste of the real sweetness of life, and so she has nothing of comparison. And that man — think of her life with him. What will it be? What does he care for all the hidden beauty and charm of her character? With Mr. Brand her life must have been one of studied repression; with Mr. Overholt she will be forced to the most tragic expression of herself. And think of it —" he clenched his hands until the one left cruel marks upon the other — "think of the things —" he stopped, shaking his head in despair.

"What? Things you know about him?"

Mrs. McGarvey had the avidity of a carrion-crow where Mr. Overholt was concerned.

"No, not things that I can absolutely say I know, but things I suspect — things I myself am sure of, in fact. And yet I must not tell her," he exclaimed, passionately.

"But, dear lad, you must tell her. You are doing wrong," said Mrs. McGarvey, in real alarm.

"No, I am not," he replied, firmly. "I have argued it all out with myself over and over. No man's home would be safe if a physician were privileged to use outside of it the knowledge he gains in it under extraordinary circumstances. I have warned her — I can not do more. And she knows enough." He fell silent, and Mrs. McGarvey abandoned herself to utter wretchedness.

At last he got up, and stood for a moment, halting, irresolute, and when he spoke it seemed more to himself than to her, the words dropping in strange, uneven groups as if forced from him by some external pressure.

"To think that I know what would forever separate — her from him — and I dare not, must not, will not tell her."

But Mrs. Brand had not yet yielded to the thought of inevitable separation between herself and Dr. Challoner. She clung persistently to the belief that by some potent effect of her personality she could unite the inharmonious elements about her in a yoke of mutual toleration for her benefit. Sometimes she found herself wondering why she cared so much about Dr. Challoner's friendship. She had never considered seriously his desire to marry her. She knew his mental outlook thoroughly, and some of the things that she valued most were contemptible trifles to him; there could be no harmonious adjustment of marital interests with such a basis as that.

So it happened that Dr. Challoner one day received a note from Mrs. Brand asking him to call and see her as soon as he had an opportunity of doing so. His first impulse was vehemently negative to any such proposal, and yet he ended by succumbing to her request, for it seemed to indicate that there yet remained a loop-hole through which he might help her to escape.

With the coming of the warm weather there had been a great deal of sickness in Moon Street, and it was at the close of a long, weary day that had made heavy drafts upon his sympathies that he found himself at liberty.

Mrs. Brand received him with a constraint that savored of embarrassment, and instantly he perceived Mr. Overholt lounging easily on a chair at the end of the room.

"Aha, doctor!" the minister exclaimed, affably. "How are you getting along in your part of the world, or the Moon, perhaps I should say?"

"Oh, don't talk about Moon Street," interposed Mrs. Brand, abruptly. "It really isn't in your line." She felt a quick resentment at Mr. Overholt's air of pleasant patronage.

But he only laughed — such a charming laugh, the echo of happy fancies in his brain, perhaps. "Ah, indeed! Well, I suppose I must pay for my privileges by a graceful submission to snubs now and then," he said with an air of gay homage. But Mrs. Brand was not listening. She was wondering desperately how to disentangle this three-stranded snarl. From Mr. Overholt she need expect no assistance; she supposed he was laughing in his sleeve at her now. And Dr. Challoner? — at that moment she impatiently conceived of him as a kind of mathematician to her conscience, perpetually haunting her with his perpendicular theories of right and wrong. She was tired of it all; she wished that she could escape to some still corner of the earth where there were no problems to be answered and no men to propound them.

But Dr. Challoner saved her from the odium of initiative. "You sent for me to come and see you. If it can be arranged I should like to see you now, alone. If not, the matter had better be dropped, for I happen to be exceedingly busy." His voice sounded to himself as if it reached him externally from some great distance, but to the hearers it had no such quality. Mr. Overholt with pleasantly quickening pulses straightened himself in his seat, and looked curiously at Mrs. Brand. He considered the situation attractive, and he meant to maintain himself impervious to anything less than a direct request from her to withdraw.

But Mrs. Brand threw her head back in the light, lofty poise which each man knew so well, for her evil star was in the ascendant, and was impelling her to the utmost defiance in thought and speech. Arthur — to speak to her like that, and before Mr. Overholt! Instantly she faced him, pale and breathless. "Thank you, perhaps that will be better. I am sorry to have troubled you about a thing that is, after all, of no consequence."

Dr. Challoner had presumed to consider himself under admirable control, but he had not bargained for just this method of being dealt with, and there was nothing in his mental equipment that responded to it harmoniously. Without a word, without even the courtesy of a parting gesture of the briefest sort, he turned and left the room.

For a few moments after he left them Mr. Overholt and Mrs. Brand sat silent. Then she suddenly turned towards him. Had she seen in his face the slightest trace of amusement it would probably have been a serious matter for him, but the lissom lines of his ready-made countenance expressed the most delicate adjustment to her mood. He looked at her patiently, seriously. Then he said with the utmost moderation of tone and manner, "I wish I might shield you forever from such trials as these."

The reckless impetus that had forced her into one crisis had not yet exhausted its momentum. "I think you may," she answered, in the same breathless way in which she had spoken to Dr. Challoner.

For a moment Mr. Overholt looked at her with an almost dazed expression. Then he bent over her. "My darling, do you mean this?" he asked tenderly, drawing her towards him. Though she yielded to the ardor of his caresses without other feeling than that they were something that she must accept as inevitable, Mr. Overholt was not likely to find her passivity a flaw just then, and yet when he released her, her eyes were full of tears — tears which he pressed gently away from her face with whispered words of endearment, for he was quite at home in the character Fate had assigned to him.

But in the middle of that night she awoke sobbing from a dream, and for the first few moments while her memory quivered in the borderland of sleep, she shivered with terror. She was alone, clinging desperately to a rock in a waste of waters, from which a hand was stretched to clutch her, a hand she knew, small and white. By degrees she remembered an old parlor print, the nearest approach to " art " that had been permitted upon the walls of Aunt Lavinia's domestic Zion. She meant to laugh about it, but instead of that she began to sob again hysterically.

Mrs. Brand did not see Dr. Challoner for some time, not until she met him one day as she was leaving Trixy's room. He held the door open for her to enter, but there was no further greeting between them than the formal bow which Trixy observed with amazement. The girl lay back upon her pillows exhausted from a long fit of coughing, and Mrs. Brand moved gently about the room attending to its various details, and rearranging some flowers. When at last she sat down beside Trixy, she saw that her eyes were full of resentful interrogation.

" What is the matter, Trixy? " she asked, not without poignant anticipation, for if Trixy had a grievance to present it would not come wrapped in cotton wool. And yet that was one of the girl's particular attractions to her.

"What makes you so mean to him?" she asked bluntly.

Mrs. Brand stared at her in silence with a straightening of her lips and a distinct set-back of her shoulders which had, however, not the least effect on Trixy.

"I'm just going to tell you all about it. You don't suppose I've been lying here all this time watching you two, and never thinking anything about it. Why, it's just all I've cared anything about. And then when you go and act like you did just now I cannot bear it, that's all. If ever man loved woman he loves you, Mrs. Brand. Ah, not with the kind of love that he loved me with. No! No!" Bitter tears streamed down Trixy's face, and in a strange tumult of feeling Mrs. Brand leaned over, and wiped them away. "Has he ever asked you to marry him?" Trixy asked in a whisper.

"Yes, Trixy, but I can't," answered Mrs.

Brand. How outrageous she would have thought it a year before to be sharing her confidences with a girl like this, but sympathy is a subtle leveller, and these two natures struck many chords in unison. A sudden rage possessed Trixy. She tossed Mrs. Brand's hand off the coverlet. "How can you be so cruel?" she said passionately, and before Mrs. Brand could explain with dignity, that there were the most conclusive reasons why she could not marry Dr. Challoner, the girl went on vehemently: "How can you hurt anyone who loves you like that? It is wicked. You don't know anything about it, but I know. His love would make you good, not bad like mine made me." She was speaking with an intensity of feeling that Mrs. Brand had never seen in her before. "Ah, you don't know, you don't know. You never lay awake all through the long night in a black horror to think what you are now, and what you might have been such a little while before. You never longed and prayed and begged for something to happen that would somehow take it all away from you — the shame of it all. You never fell asleep and dreamed that you were a happy child again, and then woke to find the terror of it nearer to you than it was when you fell asleep." Her voice sank to an agonized whisper, and she turned her face away, her poor, thin body shaken like a reed in the storm of remembrance. After a moment Mrs. Brand reached over and touched her hand. The feeling of lofty resentment that she had for some moments felt — how petty it seemed in sight of this poor child's misery.

Trixy lay silent. That this beautiful woman with the unsullied dignity of her name and place should stoop to clasp her sin-stained hand with the tender touch of sympathy had always been to her a mystery — a mystery whose precious leaven was gradually transforming her entire nature.

There was silence in the room for a long time. Trixy evidently wished for quiet. Mrs. Brand was busy with her own thoughts, but after a while her mind reverted to the bitter story of which she had had a closer glimpse to-day than ever before. Sometimes she had felt sure that the girl wished to speak to her about it. The subject had seemed too full of difficulty to be rashly approached. But to-day, perhaps, there had come to her an opportunity that might never recur, and which if wisely directed might be the means of freeing this fleeting soul of some of its burden.

"Trixy," she said gently, "you and I have been friends a long time now, but you have never told me anything about that. Isn't there anything you would like to tell me?"

Mrs. Brand was busy dressing a doll for a sick child in the room above. She had dressed a good many dolls since she first knew Trixy, for their outfits had been an unceasing source of interest to the girl, whose instinct in the matter of dress had been one of her most fatal charms.

"I guess that bonnet had better be shirred," she said now to Mrs. Brand, "and if you give her up to me I'd like to fix that sash." Her thin, trembling fingers had lost none of their inborn cunning, and, as she gave a pinch here and a twist there, she began talking in a tense monotone.

"Father died when Emmy and I were small, and left mother alone to bring us up. I've heard mother say that was the only useful thing he ever did after he married her. Mother was smart. She had been a lady's maid in some English noble-man's family before she came to this country, and she had great ideas about bringing us up right. We got the name of being proud and I guess we were. Mother kept a milliner's store, and she got along real well. She always managed to keep us at school, for she meant to make teachers of us. But the winter I was seventeen she died. Only three years ago." The gay, little doll fell from Trixy's limp fingers, and she stared absently back into the memories of that cherished girlhood.

"What did you do after that?" asked Mrs. Brand, presently.

"Well, after everything was settled up it was awfully dull; we missed mother so. Then we heard that we could get splendid places as milliners in Chicago. I didn't ever want to be a teacher, but I wouldn't have dared tell mother that. You see, we were born milliners. That was something we didn't have to be years learning, and it seemed just splendid to think of making so much money right away. So, after thinking about it a while, we pulled up and came. Em wanted to come just as bad as I did. But after we got into it we didn't like it so well as we'd expected to."

"Why?"

"Well, for one thing we had to work such long hours. Then we didn't know a soul, and nobody cared a cent about us. I used to cry about it, but Em was just like mother. She'd shove a thing through somehow, and she always said 'twould come out all right if we only had patience."

"What store were you in?" asked Mrs. Brand, impulsively.

But Trixy ignored the question, and when she began to speak again her voice was pitched in a cruder key.

"He was there, in the store. He always noticed me — after he came back — he wasn't there at first. But after a while we began to meet evenings and Sundays. Poor Em used to get pretty wild. She talked to me real straight. She said I ought to have sense enough to take care of myself, and that he never would have looked at me if I hadn't been so pretty. I knew that better than she did, but I didn't see 'twas anything to fret about. And I was so happy; I know I got prettier every day of my life. What Em said was all right, but she didn't say enough because she didn't know enough. Em never thought any further than that we might fall in love with each other, and that we couldn't get married because of his — " Trixy paused abruptly and then went on. "And a broken heart! Em couldn't think of that for me." There was a cruel irony in the pretty voice.

"I used to watch his sisters when they came into the millinery department with their mother, so that I might be as near like them as possible. They weren't pretty, but they were real ladies."

"Then he was a gentleman, Trixy?"

"A gentleman? Oh, yes, what they call a gentleman. That was just it, you see. Two or three men had wanted to marry me already, but I just couldn't bear them. I didn't want to get married. I just wanted to be left alone. It was enough to know that he loved me. I just hungered and thirsted for a sight of him through the long day. Sometimes when he was with his —— when he couldn't speak to me, it just seemed as if I must go crazy if he didn't give me a look. And he knew it. Once I stayed away from an appointment I had made with him, but I never did that again. It would have been easier to die, I think," she said simply, "and he never looked at me for a week. The time I spent with him was the only time there was to me; the rest wasn't living."

"Why did you love him, Trixy?" said Mrs. Brand, sadly. The pitiful, inevitable tragedy of this one of the myriad Marguerites whose story no poet would ever sing was burning its bitter way into her heart. This was what love wrought in an innocent life; it was well that she had set it and its sophistries out of her heart.

"How could I help it?" said Trixy, her brilliant feverish eyes wide with surprise. "He was so handsome, and he had all a gentleman's ways. He didn't make love to me like the other men did. They made me mad. But he — oh, don't you know?" she broke off, wistfully.

"Besides, why was it wrong?" she burst out excitedly after a little pause. "You love a man, and he asks you to marry him. I loved a man, and he didn't ask me to marry him, but he asked everything else, and I loved him too well to make a bargain with him. I was meant to love somebody, and I never could have loved anybody else like I loved him."

She began to sob, and Mrs. Brand said, "Trixy, I don't believe that you must tell me any more to-day. It isn't best for you to think of these things." The sight of the girl lying there with her dark-lashed eyelids closed upon cheeks bright with treacherous spots of crimson pierced Mrs. Brand with a keener pity than she had ever felt for her before.

"Yes, yes, I must tell you. I must. I will be good. I won't cry any more," she said, in a shrill, sibilant whisper. It was evident that some undercurrent of feeling was sweeping away the barriers that hitherto had bound her to silence.

"I can't tell you much about it, and you never could imagine it — the beginning of that fearful dread, and the horror of it as it grew upon me. He had told me such different things, and I didn't know. Then one day he teased me, and said I was getting dull, and that I was losing my good looks, and so I told him what was frightening me." She opened her eyes wide, and fixed them hauntingly on Mrs. Brand. "And he laughed —

laughed," she repeated, her tone rising into a sharp wail. "He told me I must manage those things better." Her eyes flashed, and she clenched her thin hands until the nails bit her flesh.

Just for a moment; then with an extraordinary return to self-control she said quite gently, "That is all, Mrs. Brand."

But to Mrs. Brand it seemed only the beginning. "Oh! Trixy," she said, hot tears in her eyes, "when the baby came — oh, my child, surely he did something, even if he could not marry you."

"Oh, no," said Trixy, calmly. "He told me himself that Em and I must leave the store at once — they wouldn't have that kind of girl in their employ. Poor Em! Poor proud Em! It broke her heart. But do you think she let go of me? She never said one word, and she worked her fingers to the bone to keep us."

"How long did the baby live, Trixy?"

"Only a few days. Just think! A little girl, and it was mine — mine!" The sweetest smile hovered lightly about her lips, and then fled, chased out of sight by her changing mood. "But do you think I loved it?" she asked, fiercely. "When I saw it the first time, lying there beside me on the pillow, I put my hands around its throat, tight, tight — and I would have choked it to death if Em hadn't come in." She was silent a moment, then with a desperate wrench she suddenly raised herself up on one arm. "Tell me, what can God do for a girl like me? Must I go to Hell, and never see my baby again? How can I ever be like I used to be?"

Mrs. Brand felt a sudden dismay. How could one reason with a poor distressed child like this?

"Listen, Trixy," she said, gently, "you mustn't think about it any more. And as for going to Hell — dear child, there isn't any such place as that. People don't think about these things as they used to."

Trixy sank back upon her pillows. "Then what's the matter with me?" she said, slowly. "Isn't there any Heaven either?" Her voice quickened resentfully.

Mrs. Brand hesitated. She had always laughed at the people who could "read their title clear" without any doubt as to its meaning, but she felt that something more than science and a surmise was needed here.

" Why, yes, there must be a Heaven," she answered, haltingly.

" Then how am I to get there? I can't get there like this," the girl said, pitifully.

" Why, God will take you there, of course. You are thinking too much about what is gone by, Trixy, and you will make yourself terribly unhappy if you keep on."

But Trixy turned away her face in a passion of weeping. " You don't understand," she cried out, miserably. " Don't you see it's all gone wrong? I've been a cruel, wicked girl, and I'm wicked still. I hate him. I would kill him now if I could, and how can I go to Heaven if I feel like that? "

" Dear Trixy, all that will be taken away when you get there."

" Yes, but I can't wait. I want it taken away now. It burns me — like a fire. Oh, don't you know the way? " She began to sob again, and Mrs. Brand got up and walked to the window in a tumult of doubt and perplexity. The afternoon sun shone warm and bright upon the dirty street, and upon the hordes of little children "damned into existence" under conditions that would have shamed animals. Her heart grew sick. Was there no way of righting these wrongs, was there nothing one could honestly offer to a soul in the quicksands?

She went back to the bed, and tenderly stroked the girl's hot forehead and tumbled hair. "I've waited so long for you to talk to me about it," Trixy began, in eager, broken whispers. "Long ago before I stopped going to church we used to hear about Christ — about Jesus." Her voice sank to the merest quiver of sound. "They said He came to save sinners. That's me. But how? Tell me!" She fixed her great eyes entreatingly on Mrs. Brand's face.

Mrs. Brand shrank back as if she had received a blow. In her fierce revolt against the narrowing creeds of her childhood, and against the later blossoming of a faith all her own that was irritably linked in her mind with her wretched love-affair, she had pursued a war of extermination against all the fine, religious instincts of her nature. She would always be able to maintain herself proudly superior to any vicissitude, but Trixy, poor Trixy, with her ruined life, conscious only of the pain and horror of it, and childishly longing for some impossible retribution of her innocence,— what was to be done with her? While she wondered what she could do Trixy's voice broke in, clear and loud, upon her bewilderment.

"What is the matter? Why don't you say something? Aren't you a Christian, Mrs. Brand?"

The color flamed into her face. A Christian! She lifted her head. "No, Trixy, I'm not a Christian, as you call it."

"Then what are you here for?" exclaimed Trixy, passionately. "I thought you knew a better way — a kinder way than the women that prayed." She turned her face to the wall with a moan of utter despair.

Mrs. Brand sat there, silent, rigid as unyielding stone for a long time. Then some subtle suggestion warning her that it was nearly time for "Em" to come home she rose up and put on her hat, and without a glance towards the bed she went away.

When she reached home it was growing dark. Before going indoors, she stopped for a moment, and looked up at the star-set sky. Those mute, insensate stars — she felt a vague, unreasoning hatred of them with their endless suggestions of system and space. The sweet, heavy odors of the flowers rose up around her; a firefly winged his brilliant way across her path, and the soft night air fanned her cheeks. But she had no heart for the beauties of nature; she was at war with nature to-night.

When she went indoors, she was told that Mr. Overholt was waiting to see her.

"Mr. Overholt," she said, blankly. "No, I cannot see him now. Tell him I am very tired." She swept on, upstairs to her own room, and locked and double-locked the door. Mr. Overholt was an exacting lover; her lips seemed to shrivel at the possibility of his lingering touch upon them. She lay awake that night thinking. Her pride had been wounded, for she had considered her method with Trixy certain of success. Had not

Mrs. McGarvey herself said as much? And now she was forced to admit that any hallelujah lass would have answered the case better. At other times she fairly moaned at the burden laid upon her, for she knew she must go back to Trixy. Her conscience smote her as she thought of the girl lying there alone. What had she thought? The cruel details of the story she had heard rose up before her like points of fire in the darkness. And yet, after all that pathetic recital she had gone away without a word.

But what could she do now? There was Arthur — yes, she could have told him her difficulty so easily, but Mr. Overholt ——! No, she could not imagine herself appealing to him about it. It would be like seeking the sympathy of a celebrated jurist on a point of moral law. A glib receipt for regeneration would put her beyond the present limits of her endurance.

The next morning Trixy, helplessly staring into a deserted, dreary future, heard again the light feet and swift silken sweep in the passage, and Mrs. Brand came in.

"Trixy, I am sorry," she said. "I do not know the way, but we will find it out together."

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Overholt had returned from his vacation hoping to find Mrs. Brand rendered more pliable by the rigors of his absence, but her welcome of him was much more restrained than he thought desirable. During his absence she had discarded the last vestiges of her mourning apparel, and he thought her very lovely in her yellow gown with yellow roses in her belt. But he did not feel at all content to spend the evening watching her opposite him in the straight, high-backed chair.

She was talking of Chrys, for the child had stayed with her during his father's absence, and, for reasons best known to herself she chose to assume that an exhaustive account of his doings was demanded of her. " I wish I could remember all the funny things he said to me. One day we had a little altercation about something I thought he should eat. He always asked the blessing, and at the next meal he said with an unmistakable suggestive accent, 'Lord bless to us what now we like to do us good.'" Mr. Overholt laughed, although he had not been sufficiently observant of her remark to know just what it was about.

"Yesterday he was sailing boats in the bath upstairs, and I overheard him making arrangements to hire an extra sailor out of Noah's ark. 'Do you want to work in my boat?' he asked. 'Well, are you a member of our church?'

"I thought you would appreciate that tale," she added. "You see how kindly he has taken to his training."

"Yes," said Mr. Overholt. He got up and came over to her, standing still and looking down at her without speaking. And she forgot the stories with which her mind had been so full.

"When are we going to be married?" he asked doggedly.

"Married! Oh, I don't know," she answered, with elaborate carelessness. But she knew the discussion was to be resumed exactly where it had broken off when he went away, unwillingly alone, for his vacation.

He dropped into a chair beside her, and, leaning over, took her work out of her hands and laid it on the table.

"How would the middle of next month do? You see, we can't put this thing off indefinitely, and I really don't think it will be in the best taste to let it get too near the first of January."

The color rose in her face. In arguing her future with herself she maintained a strictly financial point of view; she could not, however, endure any suggestion of such an attitude from him.

But she said nothing, and he took her hand, and began drawing her sleeve back from her wrist. Then he lightly kissed her arm again and again. She watched him quite coolly. He must kiss her, of course; she did not particularly mind his lips upon her wrist. But at last he turned her face towards him. "Next month?" he repeated.

"Oh, I don't want to get married," she said, lightly.

"No, of course not. It is only a little kindness on your part to oblige me. For I want to very badly. And Chrys, think of him. He sobbed himself asleep last night after he came home."

"Yes, I know," she said, in a troubled way.

"Those miserable servants, they take the most wretched care of him, poor child!" said his father. "Come! you agree to next month?"

"Oh, let us give it all up!" she said, quickly.

"Give it up!" he echoed. "Not much! Do you think after a man has tasted nectar and ambrosia he is going quietly back to bread and water? We'll settle on the middle of next month," he said, gaily. "I can get off for a couple of weeks then." He went on with eager arrangements for their trip, and she listened absently. But even then there was growing in her mind a distinct intention to put an end to it all, an intention which she perceived as if it were something quite outside of her own volition. During his absence she had contrived to think very little about him, and now that he was back again she was suddenly confronted by this strange determination in herself.

"I can't," she kept repeating to herself while he talked. "I can't." But he found her silence charming, and most appropriate under the circumstances.

When he got up to go she stepped towards the door with an underlying intention of taking leave of him in the hall. But the thing which she had dreaded happened, for he caught her to himself, and she experienced again all the stress of his love in its abandon. An unutterable disgust took possession of her while he kissed her, her lips, her eyelids, her throat, but she was still and unresistant with a pride that he could never have comprehended.

When he was gone she crept up-stairs in the darkness with a sense of such humiliation as she had never dreamed it possible that she could know.

But Mr. Overholt carried away with him a lightened heart. The question of his marriage had become a very imperative one. He was quite conscious of the fact that there seemed to be elements in his church that were not just as appreciative of him as he might reasonably expect them to be. He had achieved in it a great popular success; he had been tremendously talked about, and yet some of his old Nancys, as he called his board of deacons, were not satisfied. And certainly some of his utterances were not calculated to soothe the breasts of a wounded diaconate. "There is a little text somewhere that says, 'Resist the devil, and he will flee from you!' I have discovered a modern rendering of that — 'Resist the deacons, and they will fly at you.'" This remark of his was widely quoted, and aroused general sympathy for the deacons, which, however, always expressed itself in a smile, just as if they were sea-sick or something of that kind.

"No, no," said Mr. Boyington, when he first divined signs of an approaching scrimmage, "I hope Mr. Overholt will read the hand-writing on the wall, 'Veni, vidi, vici,' or whatever it was that old king saw up there, and get out in time. But you aren't going to pull me into the fracas. If I was in his place I'd get out so quick you could play cards on my coat-tails. And if he's going to marry Mrs. Brand ——"

"Well, he isn't. Mrs. Crumpet says there is not a reliable word in that report."

"Does she? Well, let's leave 'em alone. That's my philosophy. If they're bound to fight, don't get monkeying in the ring or you'll get hit."

If Mr. Overholt had been less preoccupied than he was with matrimonial pursuits he would undoubtedly have been able to manipulate the dangerous elements about him to his own advantage. But he had ceased to be interested in his church. It was essential to his nature that he should occupy a commanding place in the affairs of men, but he meant to pursue his future upon far more striking lines than any that a merely ecclesiastical organization could afford him. There were times when he still preached with a brilliancy that was almost startling, but he was openly indifferent to the interests of the Y. E. L. P. Society, and he had even suggested an opinion on the subject of foreign missionary fiends.

There were not wanting people who accused him of dissimulation — people who shrank from his official participation in the things most sacred to them. And yet he took himself so seriously, so momentously, that upon many people with whom he came in contact he left the imprint of his own opinion of himself. To let his genius soar and watch it, intoxicated with admiration at its flights, was a pastime of which he never grew weary. It had been the possibility of that which had made the ministry so attractive to him in the beginning.

The people who wondered why he had never gone into the law did not realize that it would have afforded no adequate scope for his emotions.

As Mrs. Brand herself was sufficiently aware her fortune was her commanding attraction to him, but after it was once assured to him, it would have been difficult to believe that he ever had loved or ever could love any other woman than herself. The part of lover became an absorbing one to him, and he operated the rôle with a keen delight in his own effectiveness. He was sometimes conscious of a disappointing lack of response in Mrs. Brand; he could have wished that she "felt the part" a little more, but then it behooved him to be lenient. Her first marriage had apparently receded from her experience, leaving very little effect behind it. She was still in many ways as raw as a girl. After all, perhaps it was better so, for he anticipated a great change in her, and it would be pleasant to know it due entirely to himself. He had a persistent theory about her; he was eager to confirm it as her husband.

So it was small wonder that he had felt such anxiety about his marriage. It meant freedom and opportunity to him, and now that these were so near he grew more and more restive under the ecclesiastical yoke.

Though it was Saturday morning the sermon hardly begun still lay unheeded upon the pastor's desk. For his thoughts were not upon the parish and its needs; they were concerned with the infinitely greater needs of his own personality, and its distinctive claims upon the universe. Far away down-stairs could be heard Chrys' shrill treble disporting itself in a most astonishing version of an old song. The keen lines about his father's eyes relaxed; he smiled as the ridiculous refrain floated up to him again.

" My bonnet lies over the ocean,
" Oh, bring back my bonnet to me."

With all his sordid calculations concerning her he was sincere in the belief that Mrs. Brand would be good to his child. His affection for Chrys was as yet the one untarnished spot in his character. It was wonderful how many women were willing to immolate themselves on the altar of matrimony for the sake of being mothers to Chrys. Mr. Overholt had felt at times that it required something akin to brute force to avoid being made a bigamist unawares. And the mother who beamed proxily upon him ——

But this was all about to end, and in the warm glow of anticipation that he felt this morning it was not to be supposed that his sermon should weigh too heavily on his dreams. He smiled a little as he recalled Mr. Brand's cautious financiering. It was the timidity of a man who had never recovered from the astonishment of finding himself rich, and for whom life had never advanced from a duty to a fine art. Still, such careers as his were the necessary foundations of those that came next, picturesque and appreciative of the claims upon them of redeeming a dull and money-grubbing world from its sordid aspect. Five hundred thousand dollars! It was not after all a great deal, but he believed he could manipulate it effectively.

In the midst of these imaginative flights the senior deacon was announced as anxious to see him for a few moments on business of importance. Mr. Overholt descended upon him affably. "Oh no, don't apologize for intruding this morning," he said genially. "Even sermons must give way to any immediate service I can render my people."

"I daresay," said Mr. Waring, with some evident embarrassment. "Still I should not be here this morning if it had not appeared to us so necessary." He paused again, and Mr. Overholt amused himself by silent speculations as to his deacon's manifest discomfort. It was clear that the pastor was to be "talked to" about something; he felt the repose of sitting on the outside edge of this ferment, when one was supposed to be an integral part of it.

But the deacon's gaze met the minister's with a gravity that was ridiculously overdone. "Mr. Overholt," he began, with a little quiver in his voice that affected his hearer strangely, "I have come to see you by myself this morning, because I felt that before you were visited by our committee it was only just that you should have some preparation for what they might say to you. I have not come, however, without their knowledge and consent — desire indeed." He stopped, but Mr. Overholt with a peremptory wave of his hand motioned for him to proceed. There was, after all, a limit to one's endurance of this sort of thing.

"Of course, you know, without my dwelling upon it that for some time past there has been a restless feeling in the church, a growing dissatisfaction —— "

"Now, will you kindly tell me just what all this beating about the bush means," interrupted Mr. Overholt, with a bland smile. "In a very few words if you please. I really am very busy this morning."

"Your wife — the nurse," faltered the deacon. It was a warm day, and he stopped to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. He had the air of a very guilty man.

"My wife — the nurse," repeated Mr. Overholt, acidly. "Now that may be a remarkably lucid statement to you, my good friend, but it lacks certain elements to make it quite intelligible to me." As he spoke he rose from his seat. He felt the utmost resentment at any gossip that impinged upon the privacy of his home.

Deacon Waring rose also. "It is only because I would have spared you, Mr. Overholt, if I could," he said, simply. "Through the nurse who took care of your wife during her last illness there has somehow spread a report — a report that you — that your wife died from an overdose of morphine." Now that he had said it the man seemed dazed with the horror of his own statement.

There was a moment's silence, broken by Mr. Overholt's voice, cool and even. "That is, then, what you came to tell me, Mr. Waring? I do not doubt the kindness of your intention, but I really fail to see in just what way you expect to benefit me." A light film of pallor had settled over his face; otherwise there was no sign in him than it was other than an ordinary conversation that was in progress.

Mr. Waring looked at him in amazement. "But don't you see — why, a minister's reputation is so fragile a thing — even a suspicion is able to ruin it completely. It is the most serious thing that could possibly happen to you."

Mr. Overholt smiled. "A minister's reputation! Really, I am not very much concerned about that just now," he said, enigmatically. "And this story ——" he blew it lightly from his fingers — "a nine days' wonder. The people crave that kind of thing. And, after all, why shouldn't they?"

"But my good man, every prospect you have will be ruined by this thing. It won't be a nine days' matter for you. You don't know what it may lead to. If you can prove — whatever proofs you have must be gathered at once. There is Dr. Challoner, you must see him."

"Ah, Dr. Challoner!" There was barely a perceptible drop in Mr. Overholt's voice. He still stood grasping the back of a chair. Over his white forehead there suddenly spread a bead-like web of perspiration. "But if as you said just now, Mr. Waring, a suspicion is sufficient to ruin a minister, I don't see just how I am to defend myself. One can not get out an injunction against a suspicion."

Mr. Waring went away in despair and consternation. He was a simple-minded man, but he had somehow the impression that throughout the entire interview he had been played with. And he could not understand that, for to him Mr. Overholt's position appeared appalling in the extreme.

When Mr. Overholt reached his study again he threw himself face downward on the lounge, and lay there without moving for some time. Then he got up, and stood quite still in the middle of the room. A curious blight seemed to have passed over him; the radiant effect of self-sufficient youth was gone. He had the dazed and shrunken look of a man who has had a great shock, of which he feels the crushing effect without understanding just what has caused it. He put his hand wearily to his head. "But did I?" he said aloud. "Did I?" He sat down abruptly in his chair, and began to force his mind back to the time with which his life now seemed to have no vital connection whatever. His wife — she had certainly left an indelible impression on his mind, but it was so shadowy and unreal. It was a long time since he had thought of her at all, and he found it quite impossible to replace himself in the old relationship. "An overdose of morphia!" His mind played about the idea without any sense of horror, but with the most lively curiosity as to what he really had done. It interested him immensely, but he could remember nothing except the intense relief he had felt when he knew that she was dead, for he was so tired, so cruelly exhausted. And with her death she had vanished out of his life, and in the crises that had accumulated so frequently since then there had been no time for useless retrospect. She had been a good wife, with no disturbing elements of character.

But in the midst of these thoughts there was continually present to him an alien consciousness of something waiting to be done. How thick and heavy his head felt. He got up and went over to a cupboard from which after unlocking it, he took a little phial. He really must have something to clear his brain.

An hour later he was on his way to Mrs. Brand, for in the vivid flashes of perception that began to lighten his way he forsaw his dangers with all the clearness Mr. Waring could have desired, and his mind, long accustomed to strange feats of speculation, began to answer brilliantly to the spur of his necessities. An unexpected and unavoidable summons to New York, that might entail a long absence for him — he would explain all that to her satisfactorily — surely she could see the necessity for their immediate marriage. The details of that assumed rapid shape in his mind. It would really be much better to be married in New York. He would see her off over the Lake Shore, and leave himself an hour or two later by another route. That would be a most delicate concession to her possible scruples on the score of propriety. After all, it occurred to him pleasantly, that she would be glad to be taken by force as it were, and married without further opportunity for argument. Only once as he came in sight of the familiar house did his courage fail. " Well, if she won't, the jig's up," he thought, as he rang the bell. But he reassured himself tenaciously as he followed the maid through the wide, quiet hall, sweet with the perfume of great bowls of flowers set here and there, and prodigal in all its appointments. Left alone to await Mrs. Brand's coming, he paced to and fro, his mind no longer working smoothly along the lines of a definite scheme, but filled with a rush of desperate thought. His feet pressed into the thick carpet, and he looked down at it suddenly with a critical appreciation of its money value. Then his eye wandered shrewdly over the furniture, and the beautiful water-colors on the wall — he had never before felt so fierce a determination to have and to hold all this for himself. In his fevered stress of mind he sought to bribe the dim ideal that still had somewhere a vague resting-place in his thought. Ah, he would like to be different; he would if he only had one chance. He sought out an easy chair, and sinking into its luxurious depths he closed his eyes as if to exclude the pressure upon them of the wealth that encompassed him. A light breeze blew a purple-blossomed vine against the window, the bees droned in the hearts of the flowers, and across the lawn came the whirr of the mower as the grass fell in a green shower about it. Into his soul there came a dim yearning for the restoration of some lost moral quality.

He sprang suddenly to his feet, for Mrs. Brand stood beside him. "My darling," he said, breathlessly. He caught her hands in his, drawing her with an insistent pressure towards him.

"No, no," she said, hoarsely. "I have something to tell you."

"So you ought," he said, with a desperate effort to smother the alarm her manner had produced in him. "But so have I, and I think that you ought to let me speak first, as I have come here just to tell you this." She must not have time to think; he must sweep her beyond her scruples by the force of his own enthusiasm. "Listen, I have had a most unexpected summons to New York. I must leave to-day. I must do this, and it may be necessary for me to be absent some time. Now, I can not — I will not bear any further separation from you. The strain is killing me. Look at me; you can see for yourself." Had he achieved his present appearance as the result of careful calculation, and infinite resource in dealing with women he could hardly have succeeded better. But the sharp sense of pity that filled her heart for him was swept quickly out of sight by his own words. "I want you to come with me — at least I want you to meet me in New York, and we will be married at once."

She drew back, putting her hand out as if to ward off further speech. But she was silent, struggling to find some impossible way to make it easy for herself and him. "It is just this," she faltered at last. "I can not. It has been a horrible mistake. I can never marry you."

"Why?" he demanded, with dry lips. Was it possible that she had already got hold of this story?

"Because I do not love you," she said, in a low voice.

"Is that your only reason?"

"Isn't it enough?" she said, with sudden vehemence.

He smiled slightly. In a moment all his carefully elaborated schemes had slipped through his fingers, for he recognized instinctively that her position, once taken, was final. But what had driven her to it?

"It might seem so, under some circumstances," he said, with caustic emphasis. But she could not feel angry with him. She was too humiliatingly conscious of her own miserable vacillation in this whole affair.

"You will never know how sorry I am," she said, simply, "nor how ashamed. If it had not been for Chrys, I think I should have known better." Her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Thank you," said Mr. Overholt, drily. This was reparation pushed to an extreme, he thought. But suddenly he stepped towards her. "Cecily," he said, imploringly, "you cannot mean it. For God's sake, think what you are doing. Have I given you any cause for this? No, you know I have not. You know I love you — you, not your money, or anything else, but you."

"Yes, perhaps," she said, slowly. "But things are all changed with me. Oh, you must have seen it."

"No, I have not."

She had sat down, but she stood up again. "Must we argue it?" she asked, gently. "It will never be otherwise."

"It must," he said, fiercely. "You ask too much. I can not give you up now. My life will be ruined if you do not marry me. You do not know what it means to me." He looked at her wildly, gripping one hand with the other as he spoke. A frantic impulse swept over him — to tell her all the difficulties that beset him. But even as he thought of that he knew that it would be useless; besides he could not do it. In a mind like his where daring schemes overlapped each other there was no room for direct simplicity of thought. He relied upon his imagination for his facts; he had even now a shifty consciousness of that as he tried to imagine himself telling her the story which should compel her sympathy.

"You talk about love!" He made a gesture of impatience. "Have I harassed you about that? I am willing to wait. It will come."

A warm color spread over her face, but she said nothing, and as he watched her his mood changed.

"What has come over you? You have everything to lose if you do not marry me." She made an impetuous movement, and a throng of words swarmed to her lips, but she would not speak. She had a feeling of such utter repugnance of herself and the part that she had played that she felt a certain satisfaction in being pelted with these odious personalities.

"Unless you mean to marry some one else," Mr. Overholt went on, slowly. His heart gave a sudden leap as he spoke, for she shrank back from him as if from a creeping flame. "Ah, is it possible!" he exclaimed, with biting emphasis.

"That is the meaning, then, of this sudden appreciation of love, and all that sort of thing."

She faced him with indignant protest. "There has been nothing to warrant you —— "

"It must be Challoner," Mr. Overholt broke in, smoothly. "Challoner!" he repeated, as if for the purpose of admiring the effect of the name upon her. "Why didn't I think of it sooner, I wonder? Since when have you developed this ardent affection for him, may I ask?" A subtle change had passed over him like a fresh, salt wind off the sea. He was erect and smiling again, a vision of invulnerable youth. He had played his last card and lost, but after all, that shifted a great responsibility off his shoulders.

Mrs. Brand looked up at him. There was a chance for her now to make atonement, and her heart clutched it desperately. Her dignity, her pride, they were as nothing before this strange, new power in her soul that urged her to the utmost reparation she could make.

"Dr. Challoner? Yes, I love him better than my life, I think," she said, with quivering lips.

"I have always loved him, I think, but I did not know it was love."

"That is very pretty — quite Arcadian, in fact." He held out his hand to her. "When is it to be?" he asked, carelessly. "Or have you waited to call my date off first?"

"You do not understand," she said, passionately. "Dr. Challoner will never ask me to marry him now." Her eyes filled with tears. The delicate reserve that she had set so imperiously aside for a moment, came back upon her with a sharp recoil, and she felt a stinging shame at what she had done.

"So that is how it stands! A most effective situation!"

"It has all been wrong," she said, miserably. "It has always been wrong with us. But I want you to remember, you *must* remember, that even if I cannot do as I thought, you and Chrys will always have a place —" it was so hard to find the best words — "you must remember that I promised to care for Chrys."

His heart softened. She had never said she loved him, and he had never supposed she did, but he knew her sincerity of feeling for his boy.

"I know you would be good to him," he said, simply. "And I shall always be grateful to you if you are." He took her hand to say good-bye, and held it while he looked at her for a moment that had for her the vague tremor of a final parting, and to him it was the last glimpse of that roseate future in which she had been, after all, the supreme fascination.

When he was gone she dropped into the chair nearest her, letting her hands fall helplessly at her sides. She was worn out, and capable of no clear thought on the interview from which her pulse still throbbed tumultuously, but even then she was gnawed by suspicions — suspicions about him always inherent in her, it seemed, and quickened by the doubts of Bruin. That terrible distrust of him with which her thought was honeycombed besieged her now with suggestions from which she shrank. The last few weeks had passed through her life like a hurricane, sweeping her heart clear of the rubbish with which she had filled it, and making room in its silent spaces for that dim visitant, so long ignored, to whom at last she stretched out hands of yearning.

CHAPTER XVI

When Mr. Overholt left Mrs. Brand's he walked rapidly along the street for some moments without any definite sense of destination. The consciousness of disaster that had been so heavy upon him when he went to see her had quite departed for the time at least, leaving in its place an expanding exhilaration which spread like wine through his veins. Let them do their worst; he was ready to take the world by the throat if need be.

He was close to the station when he heard the distant whistle of a city-bound train. A few moments later he was aboard it, speeding on its swift wings of steel towards the fulfilment of an idea that had suddenly struck him with the force of an inspiration. In its contemplation he quite forgot the crisis in his own affairs. The fellow was such an arrant fool, he reflected generously; he would probably spend the rest of his life waiting for some one to push him into the troubled pool of her affections. But who could do that as well as himself? The fascination of the idea appealed to him strenuously, and by the time the train reached the city there was no remnant in his mental outlook of the triumphant proprietorship that he had so recently felt in Mrs. Brand. As long as he could not have her why not lend his aid to the man who could? His position seemed to him a peculiarly felicitous one, for it called into play resources of which he felt himself possessed in profusion. As in the case of his wife's death, so now, he had suddenly stepped out of a whole set of emotions into a new and seductive range of experience. Pursued under so elastic a system, life seemed to offer endless opportunities for spiritual development, for what could be more convincing evidence of the harmony of the inner with the outer environment? His heart warmed toward Dr. Challoner as he drew near Brand House. Poor devil! He had given him a pretty vile time of it, he supposed, but he was ready to even things up royally now that he was at it.

He found Dr. Challoner in his office, and before the surprised man could definitely grasp the identity of his visitor Mr. Overholt had seized him by the hand, and greeted him with fraternal effusion.

"Yes, I don't wonder that you are astonished at seeing me here. The fact is a little matter came up to-day between Mrs. Brand and myself that led to developments so vitally concerning you that I felt myself compelled to come and talk the matter over with you." He could hardly forebear a smile at the attitude and expression of the man before him.

"I'm sure I don't know how to account for it," he went on genially, "but Mrs. Brand seems to have made herself and you the victims of the most extraordinary misunderstanding."

Dr. Challoner stepped forward. "You will refrain from any further reference to Mrs. Brand," he said, in a voice that filled the little room.

"Can't very well, my dear fellow, unless you would prefer me to refer to her as the X-feminine. That would be appropriate."

Dr. Challoner laid his hand heavily on the minister's shoulder. Mr. Overholt was gratified. The situation was developing. "That's right. Your feelings do you the utmost credit. But they're just a little out of date."

Dr. Challoner drew back with an exclamation of contempt. Bah! As well attempt to demonstrate moral perspective to a canary-bird.

"You see, it's like this. You know that Mrs. Brand and I have been engaged. Well, owing to some unforeseen circumstances,——" he stopped suddenly, and put his hand to his head, the most peculiar expression, a sort of hunted look, appearing in his eyes, while upon his face a gray, withered shadow seemed to rest — "to cut it short, my friend, I went to see her to-day, and she — ah, she expressed a preference for you that quite cut me off from the enjoyment of her affections. Do you understand?" He eyed the man opposite him curiously. "Loves you, you know; always has; would die for you, I believe — that kind of thing. So she said, anyway. Rather a grating experience for me, don't you think?"

Dr. Challoner said nothing, but his slowly blanching face, and the grip of his teeth upon his lips were sufficient testimony. "Hem! He takes it rigidly," thought Mr. Overholt, with a sense of disappointment.

But all at once Dr. Challoner brought his clenched hand down upon the table beside him with a crash that splintered into fragments the glass apparatus which stood on it. His eyes flashed like molten points of flame, for into his mind tense with a tremendous vision of supremest blessedness there had penetrated a thought more cruel than he could bear. If such an incredible thing could be true, this man would necessarily be the last one in the world to tell him of it. For one vehement moment he had all the feelings of a man who longs to crush the malignant life out of another. Then he said with a slow, shaken utterance, "When Mrs. Brand wishes me to know these things she will probably be able to tell me them herself. In the meantime, as you seem to enjoy my office, I will leave you to the undivided possession of it." He was turning on his heel when he paused, his keen eye arrested by a rapid change in Mr. Overholt's appearance.

"What is the matter?" he said, roughly. "Are you ill?" For Mr. Overholt was leaning unsteadily against the wall, his white face with its blue lips covered with that film of perspiration again, and his eyes staring vacantly before him. But at the sound of the sharp voice beside him he braced himself involuntarily and seemed to regain his poise as quickly as he had lost it.

"Ah, nothing! Was I faint, perhaps?" he said, with an effort towards his usual airy manner. He looked at Dr. Challoner with a puzzled expression, as if his memory were slow to respond to some unconscious demand upon it. "Ah, to be sure! I remember now. Yes, yes!" His manner underwent a change, for he had stumbled upon one of the few, genuine moments of his life. "No, you don't believe me, but it is true, nevertheless, that I have done you to-day the greatest service that one man could render another. I have voluntarily placed in your keeping all that had been snatched from mine. And you? All you want is to kick me out of your sight."

It was six o'clock, and the streets were crowded with a jostling throng of men and women disgorged from the surrounding factories, but as he hurried away back towards his train he was as unconscious of their noisy proximity to him as if he had been alone on the silent reaches of Sahara. As he sank into his seat in the train a faint smile crossed his lips. "To think that I should have been so carried away. It was just the touch to make the interview perfect." After a while he took out his note-book, and scribbled a few lines in it, and after reading what he had written a great many times he tore out the page, and when the train reached Glenedge he went into the nearest drug store for an envelope and stamps, for he was possessed by a restless desire to send the message on its way as soon as possible. "I have been to see Dr. Challoner," he had written Mrs. Brand, "as I thought for the happiness of all concerned that he ought to know of your state of mind as soon as possible. His message to you is that you are probably quite capable of telling him your mind when you get ready."

There was the usual soda-water crowd in the store, and even to his present obscured perceptions there seemed something strange in the way they shrank back from him as he passed. He had felt some surprise in the train at seeing his members, one after another, hurry by the vacant seat beside him into the forward car, although he had really preferred to be alone. But after he had posted his letter, there remained in his mind an irritating sense of discomfort that grew upon him steadily as the stimulating events of the outlived afternoon receded from his imagination. The impudent brilliancy of scheme and execution that had so often passed for moral courage deserted him at last, for he had no longer any goal in view.

When he reached home the first thing to meet his eye was his evening paper lying on the doorstep. He picked it up, and mechanically straightened it out as he went in, dully catching the big head lines, "Sensational Disclosures ——" What was that? He tore it open, and farther down the page was his own face looking out at him with the easy assurance of a man who has no doubts of his supreme ability to cope with the world for which he lies in wait.

Later that night the minister sat alone in his silent house, desperately fighting back the flood that threatened to overwhelm him. The interview that had just ended between him and his deacons replaced itself continuously in his brain. Not to appear in his pulpit to-morrow? — to be forced to hide from his people like a felon in his cell until an official board had investigated — what? A long fit of shivering seized him, in which he was sensitive only to the physical suffering that held him in its grip. But his brain cleared after a while, and he fell upon his case again with a species of fury that he felt must bring some result. But wait! An investigation? — what did that mean? Where would it end? There were back numbers in his history to which he had not turned for years. They seemed to him to have no more relation to his present than if they had belonged to some previous state of incarnation. But there were people who would take no such view of the matter. His head fell forward upon his hands, and he sat for nearly an hour staring at his feet with eyes that had in them the vacant glaze of despair. And then into his burning brain there pierced a thought as lucent as a cooling stream between hot banks of sand. His wife! Ah, if he could but find a way back to her tenderness. Her sweet face rose up before him; her soft, blue eyes sought his with the same vague look of bewildered appeal that had first thrilled his ready heart long ago. Somewhere she must be waiting for him still alone, perhaps, like a frightened child in the dark, wondering why he did not come.

What was that? Only the big clock in the hall sonorously striking twelve, but the bottle in his trembling hand fell to the floor with a crash. For a long time he stood there, petrified, staring at the splintered glass and the dark spot on the carpet. But there was more of it somewhere, if he could only find it. It would ease those terrible beats in his head that seemed to him each one like the last, slow stroke of eternity. He would sleep, and to-morrow he would awaken to a new day, over which there should be no shadow of hovering horror.

In the early morning his little child, waking into rapture at the sight of his father kneeling at his side, tried to awaken him with light lips upon the bent head, and then with tender protests that grew from plaintiveness to bewilderment, and finally with a dread he could not understand, he cried aloud in terror.

CHAPTER XVII

"AUNT CECILY, can Satan put his hand up through the earth and pull you down to Hell?"

"No, dear, no! Whatever made you think of such a thing?" Mrs. Brand straightened herself pugnaciously on the lounge where she had been resting, but before she could say anything further Chrys proceeded reflectively, "Anyway, it is much better to be good, because then your heart beats so smooth and soft."

"Dear child!" she thought, tenderly, with a passing smile for the baby-philosophy that, after all, went deeper than it seemed. It was Sunday afternoon, and the cold, December rain blew in torrents against the windows. Mrs. Brand had been asleep, and Chrys, who had conscientious scruples against the napping instinct in his elders, had been at his wits' ends to furnish entertainment for himself while he let her sleep, according to what he vaguely felt later to have been a most ill-judged promise. She had thought herself sleeping until she had heard his clear, little voice saying in a tone of dangerously patient remonstrance, "God, this is the third time to-day I have asked you to stop the rain, and you haven't done it yet."

"Chrys," she said, gently, and in an instant he was beside her, briskly alive to the opportunities of renewed companionship. She was still sleepy, and she found it difficult to keep up with his brilliant leaps from one subject to another, but Chrys had his own persevering methods of securing attention to the topic immediately in view.

"Let us die to-day," he said, with a most alluring expression on his face. "Why should we wait any longer? I want to ride my Heaven-horse so badly. Let us go, Aunt Cecily."

"No, darling. There are so many things God wants us to do down here first."

"What?" asked the child, brusquely.

Mrs. Brand hesitated a moment. Then she said briefly, "Jim."

"Yes, Jim." The little face softened instantly.

"Poor Jim! Aunt Cecily, why does God let Jim have a crippled leg? I wouldn't if I was God."

"I know, dear." These baby questions, they were just her own, after all. "But God has given Jim a most beautiful soul. He will always have that, but he will only have his leg a little while." She often felt appalled at the strange twisting of circumstances that had forced two souls into her keeping, Trixy's and this child's. She felt a responsibility for them that she would have disdained for herself. From the moment that Chrys was brought to her, shocked by his father's death, she had set herself to fit this experience of his into a natural place among his memories, but she had many a heartache over the premature baptism of this sensitive, little spirit into the sorrow and suffering of the world before she succeeded, and perhaps her methods were at least unusual. She had vivid recollections of the pallid, palm-bearing wretches who had figured as angels in her childish imagination, and of the fearful God, caparisoned like a Greek patriarch, who presided over their melancholy performances. No! There should be no such travesties of the Divine Nature to pervert the tender soul of this little one. Like all children a born theologian, Chrys revelled boldly in the mysteries of the future life, and Mrs. Brand found herself compelled to furnish the most definite theories concerning it. But she was better able to do that now than she would have been sometime before, for from the day she had gone back to Trixy saying, humbly, "I do not know the way, but we will find it together," she had patiently devoted herself to leading the poor girl into the only path that seemed to promise peace. No pastor could have searched the Scriptures with more zeal than she did, and if her conclusions were sometimes strangely at variance with what his would have been, she drew them from the selfsame source. She watched the change in Trixy with a feeling of awe, unconscious of the tremendous effect the girl's experience was having upon herself. She had begun this work of salvation in another in a strange frame of mind. At first she had thought of appealing to some outsider for aid, but she knew how Trixy would resent such an intrusion. And with a strain of scorn in her thought it had seemed to her that if the Gospel were good for anything it could surely stand her presentation of it. She was disappointed in Trixy; she had thought the girl made of stuff like herself, of a grain fierce and fine enough to hold itself together without the props of superstition. But it seemed cowardly to desert her in her extremity, and so she had assumed this mission of redemption along lines that she despised.

After these few months she could hardly think of it without tears. For in that bare little room she had stood upon holy ground; she had witnessed a mystery that her brain refused to admit, but towards which her own heart yearned. It was the same old experience over which Aunt Lavinia would have gloated, as she complacently ticked off its various stages with the crude catchwords of her Calvinistic convictions. And though there were moments when Mrs. Brand might argue it down and resist the basis of it, she could never deny her part in it, nor its hallowing influences upon herself.

That Gospel story — how simple it had seemed as she had read it to Trixy, with no other thought than to find in it a value for a bruised and broken life. And it was so full of that. There seemed to be so many things which must have been written just for Trixy. Here was no elaborate scheme of salvation, no creed, rearing its hydra-headed barrier between the soul and its home. For Trixy's sake she became eager to seize upon the most lovely portions of the story, and it was small wonder that there came times when her vivid, unworn recital of its tender, tragic passages smote them both into silence too tense for speech.

After a while she became conscious of an encroaching audience at these readings. Little Jim Moriarty had always been free to come and go as he pleased, but there were others, poor dumb drudges of women who stood about the door at times with an expression in their eyes as of thirsty things clustering around a pool of living water. And, once, there was some one else who had come heedlessly up the stairs, and then stopped, thrilled by the sound of her voice as it rose and fell in vibrant cadences, which, as he listened, had power to fuse into one, sweet strain all the aching discords of his heart. Not love her? As well bid the sun cease its shining as to try to stem the current that swept towards her, sweeping his stubborn scruples out of sight. For he had told himself a thousand times that he would not love her; that these things were amenable to reason would one but listen to its mandates. He had hotly argued her unworthy, and what proof was there, indeed, that she had really broken with Mr. Overholt that last day. None but the dead man's word, a wanton trust to pin one's faith to. A man who had braced himself for months with the most deadly of stimulants,—a fact that had been amply demonstrated after his death,—what reliance could one place upon the account he had given of her? But how he cherished it! When he had met her after Mr. Overholt's death she had greeted him with a reserve that neither asked nor gave anything, and as time went on the stiffness of her manner had but increased. No, it must have been only a mad trick or she would long ago have found some womanly way of indicating herself to him. She came to Brand House quite often now, for in that crisis, when she seemed to stand alone the target for every base rumor with which the daily press rang, she had sent for Mrs. Mc-

Garvey. He had never been able to find out upon just what terms the intimacy of the two women had rearranged itself, for from that time on Mrs. McGarvey manifested a most provoking reticence with regard to Mrs. Brand. When she came home after the events of that dreadful week were over, and already fading out of the fickle, public mind she had said to him, severely, "You're a bad boy. I'm ashamed of you."

"Why?" he asked, astonished.

"Fiddlesticks!" she retorted, eloquently. "You know why well enough."

"But would you have me force myself upon her?" he demanded, indignantly. "You know that she barely tolerates me."

Mrs. McGarvey snorted gently, as if she felt too great a contempt for his conduct to waste her breath upon it.

But she talked quite freely of Chrys. "Yes, she's going to keep him. There doesn't appear to be anybody else, and the child is absolutely destitute, what with his father's nice, little side speculations and his debts. How the wrangle about his insurance is going to come out I don't know, but

I guess the company will have to pay, for as long as he was in the habit of taking that stuff, and had been known to have taken too much before, I can't see how they can prove suicide. The man was a villain, but for the dear child's sake I hope they can clear his memory up as much as possible. He's a lovely child — not but what the homeliest bairn is just as sweet," she added, with a tender rush of memory backward over the years to the little ones whose red hair and freckled faces had been emblems of beauty to her when the tide of life was at its flood. "And fond of her! I never saw anything like it."

"He always seemed to me a vain, spoilt, little fellow," said Dr. Challoner, hastily.

Mrs. McGarvey smiled tantalizingly. "I suppose Mrs. Brand realized that her taking such prompt charge of the child would make it very difficult for her to convince people that she was not intending to marry Mr. Overholt," continued Dr. Challoner, stiffly.

"Yes, she did," snapped Mrs. McGarvey, "and do you think she cared? Lots of people offered to take him, but I tell you she would have scorned to save herself that way. And Mrs. Crumpet has been a great help. She publishes far and wide the news that she regrets Mrs. Brand's step, for that, of course, she would be glad to do her duty by the child whose father intended her to be its mother. Mrs. Crumpet has the most satisfying theories about the whole thing. She thinks Mrs. Brand is really at the bottom of all those reports, just out of jealousy because of Mr. Overholt's preference for Mrs. Crumpet."

But these talks had taken place many weeks before that wet December afternoon when Mrs. Brand sat with the dead man's little boy closely curled up beside her while she read "Pilgrim's Progress" to him. She thought it a dreadful book, but it had the true, aboriginal instinct for strong effects, and, after all, it was the mildest religious stimulant compared with Fox's "Book of Martyrs," by which her own young blood had been quickened under Aunt Lavinia's sway. People had grown tired of wondering whether Mr. Overholt had committed suicide or not, whether he had poisoned his wife or not, and whether Mrs. Brand had really been going to marry him. But even as she read to Chrys the dreary refrain of some of these questions kept ringing in her ears. It seemed to her sometimes that she would never conquer the humiliation that beset her in regard to Mr. Overholt. That she, who had prided herself on her ability to dispose of her future to the best possible advantage should have made such an absolute fool of herself, made her heart hot with shame. And Arthur — what could he think of her? Not that she needed to wonder about that, for his opinion was clearly made manifest by his manner to her. Once she had questioned him boldly, asking him to what he considered Mr. Overholt's death directly due. "I really cannot tell," he had replied, ambiguously, looking coolly over her head at the wall beyond. "You must remember that Mr. Overholt is known now to have kept himself up under the strain of his wife's illness by the use of that drug, and, besides, the nurse was actuated by a desire for revenge because of Mr. Overholt's ——" He hesitated as from a polite wish to spare her references that must be disagreeable. "Because he had trifled with her sister," added Mrs. Brand, quickly. But the matter had dropped there, for it was evidently not his intention to be drawn into any discussion that had Mr. Overholt for its subject.

"There, dear, see! It has stopped raining, and the sun has come out. Don't you think you would like a race around the path with Darkey?"

She stood close to the window to watch the flying, little figure as it came every now and then around the curve. Dear little Chrys! He was the one, sweet spot in her life just now. To be sure, there were times when she shrank from the thought of possibilities the years might bring as they forced his character to the surface, and then her only hope lay in her belief that his little mother had set the stamp of her own, simple sincerity upon her boy. He had certainly inherited his father's peculiar grace and charm of manner, and she winced with pain sometimes at his childish reproduction of some well-remembered gesture. There remained in her mind no clear vision of that storm-swept season of her experience. It was a blurred and hideous nightmare. And then, sharp upon its confused clamor there had come that sudden, tragic silence more terrible than any tumult. The horror, the shame of it all, had twined its way through her sensitive nature like an acid. And the thought of the man himself, forsaken by friend and enemy alike to the solitary misery of those last hours, haunted her incessantly. The strange windings of his uncertain character had baffled most of those who thought they knew him best, and in their memory of him there was little that did not yield a sting. But when she had heard the account of his deacons' last interview with him, her pity had broken forth in vehement protest. They had badgered him in the "sweat-box" like a red-handed criminal, with cruel indifference to his overwrought condition. In the long, still hours she had often followed him in bitter retrospect until he found peace beside the only, little being in the world who had implicit faith in him. There were times when she could not forbear the belief that the fault was hers — that if she had herself been different, if she had cared less for the most contemptible things in the world, there would never have been that tragic chapter in her history. She seemed to have dipped her hands in pitch for the sake of snatching something that, after all, did not belong to her. What right had she to all that wealth? The fierce light that she had turned upon herself and her motives sent its long illumination back into the dark corners of her life as John Brand's wife. What had she given the old man in return for his proud and tender solicitude for her, that had reached out in pathetic effort for her eternal welfare? She had given him nothing that she could by any possible means withhold. She had rated her youth and beauty extremely high. They seemed little enough now in comparison with the sterling honor in which her husband had held her. For from the moment when she had first seen Mr. Overholt again she realized now that her mind had been absorbed in a determination to rekindle in him the old fires. Extenuating circumstances? Perhaps, but in her present repudiation of the woman who had been herself she had no place for pleas of that sort.

And now everything for which she had been willing to barter herself was slipping rapidly away from her. Her home, her wealth, in a few short weeks all the external trappings of her exclusiveness would be stripped away from her.

She nodded brightly to the child as he swept by in furious pursuit of the big Newfoundland that bounced ahead of him like a Brobdignagian baseball, but her eyes were dim with tears.

How humbly she had watched him lately in his work at Brand House. How she had learnt to reverence the calm simplicity of which she had often made light. She had been amazed to find what a place he had already gained for himself in the world. "I tell you," she had overheard an enthusiastic man say a few days before, "he holds all the unions of Chicago in the hollow of his hand. Not a single strike could be declared unless it first had his sanction." How absurdly proud that had made her feel, and she had unconsciously beamed upon the speaker in an inexplicable way that made him suddenly virtuously reminiscent of a wife and seven children at home. She had spoken to Dr. Challoner a few moments afterwards, the soft glow still in her dark eyes, but he had answered her shy, swift sentences with slow and ponderous gravity. But while he talked to her he was wondering wildly what he had said to her last, for he had been thinking only of her white hands, dainty, fluttering things, that he longed to take in his own, strong grasp, and her softly curving cheek awoke in him a mad longing to lean over and kiss it, reckless and defiant even of the people about them. Perhaps had they been alone he might have done that, or she might have broken out in the fierce denunciation of him with which her heart was hot when she turned coldly away from him. What was it that he wanted of her? Did he expect her to make humble apology to him for her past wilfulness and ill-treatment — yes, shameful ill-treatment — of himself? Well, she never would. And she did not believe he loved her, anyway. Perhaps he was impatiently trying now to shake her off, alarmed and disgusted at what Mr. Overholt had told him, if Mr. Overholt ever had told him anything of the kind. She could not help thinking sometimes that he had only written so to her for the sake of paying off a few of his own scores.

It was all a hopeless tangle. She had trampled her opportunity under foot, and now she must bear the consequences. Clearly he did not care. He knew she was approaching an experience that would be arduous to her, and yet he had not a word of sympathy or help for her.

"What is it, dear?" she asked, as Chrys appeared, lagging and dejected under the evident weight of some serious woe.

"You see, Aunt Cecily, that's the good of having four legs instead of only two, like me." He looked down at the inadequate means provided by Providence for his locomotion with utter contempt. "How could I suspect to beat Darkey in a race? Perhaps if two boys had raced him together — then there'd have been four legs ——" But he paused with such instant suspicion of this logic in his pliant, little face that Mrs. Brand laughed and caught him in her arms. "I'm tired and hungry, Aunt Cecily, but not bread and butter hungry. I'm only cooky hungry, Aunt Cecily."

"So am I, Chrys," she said, with a wistful smile. "I'm only hungry for just the thing I want."

CHAPTER XVIII

If Dr. Challoner's heart sometimes failed him under the pressure of the tremendous task that he had undertaken, he had but to remember, one by one, the people who had come to rely upon him as the barrier which stood between them and the industrial Juggernaut, heroes, some of them, in that furious struggle for the crusts of existence, those precious crusts for which even human lives were deemed a poor equivalent.

So many responsibilities had grown up upon his hands, of which he had never dreamed when he first began to make his solitary way about the hidden plague-spots of the great city, that he felt sometimes indignant at the frequent, glib reference to himself as an authority on social questions. "An authority!" he said, impatiently. "It is only the people who don't know anything about this newest of all the sciences who can afford to pose as authorities upon it." Then it was a comfort to go back to the simple conception of his place in the world which had sent him first among these people — the idea that there were some forgotten, unfortunate ones who might be helped just by knowing that some one was thinking about them, and longing to find a way of making their lives more bearable. That was all the working theory he had, but it was enough, and he was glad to take refuge in its simplicity when it seemed as if he were in danger of being swamped by the modern horror, organization. There were people who seemed bent not only on organizing his work, but on organizing him into a peripatetic puppet for the delectation of those happy mortals who put in their time between now and eternity in a wild-eyed search for new sensations. "It will be just lovely," said a sweet society leader. "I'll have him speak in my new Louis Quinze drawing-room, and we'll drape a background for him of flags of all nations, and then we'll put all about him engravings of things like Marie Bashkirtseff's Street Arabs, you know, and that kind of thing. And I'll wear a Louis Quinze gown and look demure, and Mrs. High-Buffum can sing;

'Come unto Me, all ye that labor' — there, who says I can't plan something real serious and improving?"

But Dr. Challoner refused to consider himself against a flag background, with a Louis Quinze foreground, and even told the dainty sponsor of the scheme, that the thing he most dreaded was an epidemic of slum-fad among society women. "Better keep on dancing," he said, not unkindly. "You will really do us less harm that way."

But his position as head of an enterprise that was destined to attract widespread attention by reason of the marked success of some of its methods, and the prominence of the men interested in it, subjected him to publicity from which he could not hope to escape, and at last, in response to a serious and just demand for more definite information regarding the work in Moon Street, he arranged to give a series of afternoon talks at Brand House. "No, I will not go to them to speak," he said, decidedly. "I want my illustrations right in sight. People remember better with their eyes than with their ears. And I don't want to talk to anybody who hasn't interest enough to come down among these things."

It had become the intention of Mr. Brand's trustees to use the bulk of his bequest for the building and endowment of a manual training school. It seemed to Dr. Challoner, when this idea first began to take root in their minds, that some of their plans were on a very broad and far-reaching basis, and before long he realized that two of them, at least, had no misgivings as to the financial outcome of the undertaking.

"No, Brand's money would never do all we have in view. I think you and I will have to piece things out a bit, old lady," Mr. McGarvey had said to his wife. "And it's only the wisest kind of a Providence and his duty to his family that keeps Boyington from putting in every cent he's got."

And yet what a drop in the ocean of human misery all this brave-sounding effort seemed. Dr. Challoner remembered dens called homes, where in spite of the most vicious influences, tender human affections grew and blossomed into beauty, only to be wrenched asunder because there was not bread enough to hold the precious spirit in its poor starved body. There was the little one who slipped silently away for lack of the care no one dared pause to give it, and the mother whose share of the scanty meal had too often found its way into the eager, little mouths about her, and who loosed her fitful hold on life with a cry of anguish for the helpless children left to battle with it alone.

"After all, the Turks were far more merciful to the Armenians than we are to our poor," said Dr. Challoner one night that winter. "We are never sufficiently humane to go out honestly and slaughter off a few thousands. We prefer slow torture for all of them." He had come in late, and had sat down to a supper that Mrs. McGarvey noticed he hardly touched.

"What is it?" she asked. "Adolph Heller?" For she was sure something special had happened to stir him to such an unusual display of feeling.

"Yes. When I went in there to-day, there he sat sewing under such an awful strain that the blood was slowly oozing from his ears. And his wife lying there, watching him, with death in her face! But he must keep up that pace, for if he can't there are others who will, for a while at least! And yet we call ourselves a Christian people!"

He pushed his plate away from him, and leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes with a sharp sigh, as if he longed to blot out the pursuing memory of such scenes.

"What did you do?" asked Mrs. McGarvey, after a while.

"I just took that cursed work out of his hands, and told him he had done the last stitch for a while. I meant until his wife was dead, but he doesn't know that. I left them so happy, for the poor boy is sure she will get well, now that he has time to care for her.

"But first I sat there and just watched that thing until it had burnt itself into me. I never want to forget it. I ask God to avenge his poor upon me if I ever do. I have saved Adolph Heller to-night, but think! There are hundreds like him in the city to-night, and there is no one to save them, or to care."

Mrs. McGarvey had never seen him so shaken, for usually he preserved an exuberant courage in dealing with the problems about him that had been of the greatest service in inspiring his less hopeful followers.

"I had an experience in that little room — a kind of baptism into the pain and sorrow of the world." He looked at Mrs. McGarvey with misty, glowing eyes. "If I could die to-night in the most awful, the most cruel way that could be devised, and by that death save these poor ones from their lives of wretchedness and cruelty, how gladly I would die!"

Mrs. McGarvey cherished that hour with him among her most sacred memories, for it seemed to her that she had witnessed the entrance of a soul into its highest and most Christ-like possibilities.

A few days later, at the close of one of the afternoon talks, Mrs. Brand found herself the center of a group of people, old society acquaintances some of them, of whom she had seen little since her husband's death, who were eager to discover her own attitude with regard to these things.

"Don't you think it's going to make these people terribly discontented, Mrs. Brand?" inquired a bright-faced girl, with a confident belief in her ability to handle any topic wisely as long as she was gowned in the "latest."

Mrs. Brand looked at her for a moment quietly. Then she said, "Are you never discontented yourself, Miss Hilton? Is it any more a crime for them to be discontented because they have nothing, than it is for us because we have so much we don't know what to do with it? Don't you sometimes get discontented because you have so many gowns you really don't know which one to wear?"

"Oh, no; not discontented — just tearing mad," said the girl, with her sweet laugh. "No, please don't say another word. I was foolish to ask such a question."

"Not that I admit their discontent," Mrs. Brand went on, with a smile. "The miracle to me is their patience. Many times I have gone home wondering why in the world they didn't blow us all up."

There was a little stir on the edge of the circle, and Dr. Challoner, who was standing near, saw a lady, white-haired and stately, on the arm of a young man, perhaps her son, making her way towards Mrs. Brand. After the bustle of introductions had subsided he found himself watching Mrs. Brand curiously. Her voice, sweet and yet so subtly charged with some intensity of feeling, carried her words beyond the silent group around her.

"You wonder how I first became interested in these things? Well, of course, I had heard a great deal about them from Dr. Challoner, and I had been greatly interested always in the artistic possibilities of the stories he told me — some of them were really admirable in a dramatic way, but it never occurred to me that there was anything I ought to do until I came in contact with a young girl who was lying ill in one of the tenements." A swift vision of Trixy rose before her. How could she go on? But something, perhaps it was the charming by-play between the young man and the pretty girl, goaded her on to the telling of poor Trixy's story.

"This girl interested me from the beginning, and I was fortunate enough to interest her, for she allowed me to do a great many things for her that were a help to both of us. But it was a long time before she told me anything about herself. She had been carefully brought up, and she must have been a lovely girl, for her charm is still apparent. But there are certain rules a girl like Trixy should never transgress. She was not in a station in life that entitled her to be pretty with impunity, and she had neither father nor brother." Her eyes swept the young man's face, with its contemptuous smile, for he was thinking, "How vulgar a woman can be!" And then she went on hurriedly, with hardening voice, "Poor Trixy's days are numbered now, but I never knew until last night, when she called it aloud in her delirium, the name of the man who must, who shall yet pay the penalty of Trixy's misery. And he was, as she had said, what we should call a gentleman." Her lips were quivering now, but, with a bow to some, and a few graceful words to others, she disentangled herself from the men and women around her, and moved towards Dr. Challoner. In a moment he understood the mute appeal of her eyes, and without a word he quickly led the way to the shelter of the deserted dining-room.

"Was it wrong?" she asked of him, humbly. "I could not keep it. I should have despised myself forever if I had been afraid to speak. I should have been a coward."

"I know. I honor you for what you said." Her eager face, lifted to his, lost its troubled look, and she smiled, with the angry tears still standing in her eyes.

"You see," she went on in a voice so tremulous now that the need for self-restraint was passed, "I could not bear to see him there, hovering like a hawk about that pretty girl ——"

"Ah, that was it, was it?" said Dr. Challoner. "I did not know, — one could not tell that you were speaking directly to any one."

From the rooms beyond came the dense hum of many voices that seemed to hem them in with walls of living sound, there, alone, and he so near to her that each fluttering breath of hers seemed to him as if it were his own.

"But I do not mind as long as you ——" He could not bear it, this sudden, sweet dependence upon him, and in another moment the crowding tide within would have burst the barriers he had so stringently set for it. But Mrs. McGarvey, sweeping heedlessly into the room, followed by that species of mortal whose chief accomplishment consists in being thirsty at the most inopportune season, unconsciously wrecked the climax that it had been her most cherished dream to promote. But that did not prevent her remarking, with the complacency of a marplot to Mr. McGarvey that evening, that she had always known how it would be from the beginning, and that she really believed it needed just a word — her word — to straighten the whole thing out satisfactorily. Mr. McGarvey ventured a feeble doubt about this, which entailed upon him such a fusillade on the subject of male creatures in general, that he retired precipitately among his thoughts, and stubbornly stayed there, in spite of his wife's efforts to draw him out. You can not persuade a mouse out of its hole by shouting.

The next day Mrs. Brand began her first definite arrangements towards leaving her home. The trustees had as yet said nothing to her about it, and she appreciated their reserve, but it placed the burden of initiative upon her, and she shrank with the utmost dread from any possible discussion of the matter. There were times when she longed to repudiate the last cent of dependence upon Mr. Brand, but how could she do that, freighted as she was now with the up-bringing of a little child? And, after all, she had been his wife; he had come into her life at its most critical point of development, and had bent all her possibilities in his own behalf.

She walked through the beautiful rooms one after the other, making a swift inventory of the things that under the terms of the will she could justly claim as her own. When she was back in her own sitting-room she revised the list in a numb kind of way, and then sat there staring at it blankly. After all, what did she care about any of it? This house, upon which she had expended her utmost skill until every room bore the imprint of her exacting taste in color and design, what happiness had it brought her in the waste and arid years that she had spent in it, those years when she had proudly assumed that her heart could be satisfied with the beauty that entranced her eye?

The memorandum fluttered to her feet, and lay there forgotten. A loathing for her surroundings arose in her. A vision of herself and Chrys walking away out of it all into some fresh and honest future rose up in her mind and seemed sweet until some subtler thought for which her heart had no words, gave a cruel and jagged edge to her dreams, and filled her eyes with tears. The announcement of a visitor put an end to her arduous reverie.

"Miss Hilton? Bring her in here, Jane," she said, for she had an instant feeling that this visit was to be anything but a conventional one. The picture of the happy girl, lifting her tell-tale eyes to the sated gaze of the man beside her, had been a rankling memory to her since yesterday, and she was full of pity for the charm that was destined to be its own destruction.

"Now, what is it you really want to talk to me about?" she said, gently, after they had played an unavailing game of pitch-and-toss for some minutes.

The girl laughed with an air of relief. Then she said, shyly: " Oh, if I could only tell you just what I thought I could before I came!"

" What is it? Something about Mr. Sanger, perhaps," suggested Mrs. Brand.

" Yes, I think so," replied Miss Hilton, with a bright blush. " Perhaps you don't know — oh! of course you don't, that they all want me to marry him, his people and mine, I mean — and I think he wishes it himself," she added, wistfully.

" And you?" said Mrs. Brand, gently.

" Oh, of course I shall marry him, I suppose, but there are things I don't feel happy about."

" My dear, if you are quite resolved to marry him, I should think the less you think of those things the better," said Mrs. Brand, gravely. " If you accept him, it must imply accepting them."

" Yes, but I want to be sure just how much it is that I have to accept." A weary shadow crossed the bright, young face, and the pretty mouth straightened into a line that betokened other and less alluring feminine qualities than Mr. Sanger undoubtedly counted on in the woman he had signified himself as willing to endure with matrimony.

"Something he said to me yesterday, after you had told us about that girl — oh! I have had all kinds of thoughts ever since."

There was a little pause, for Mrs. Brand was not willing to speak.

"It is just this," the girl began at last, desperately, "I only want to know that you know nothing, — don't you see that, putting together what he said to me, with wondering why you told us that story, — oh! I only want to know that he was not that man."

"Why need you care?" asked Mrs. Brand, abruptly.

"I? Care?" repeated the girl, in surprise. "Why, of course I care." She looked at Mrs. Brand with some indignation.

"But you have never expected him to have a standard of conduct at all approximating your own for yourself. You have taken it for granted that he might do with impunity what would be fatal to you."

"Yes," said Miss Hilton, slowly. "But it's different when one is only generalizing." Then, with a quick, vindictive change of tone, she added, "But one does expect more of a woman than of a man in that way."

"Yes, I am quite willing to admit that. And it is partly because of that instinctive demand that a woman shall realize and set the ideal of purity. because her penalty is so great when she does not. And while there is a growing insistence that there shall be one standard of morality for men and women, it seems to me sometimes as if some very good men and women were really advocating a uniformity of license for man and woman. That tendency accounts for the false sentimentality talked and written about the fallen woman just now. Poor Trixy is a fallen woman, and she knows it, however charming she may have been and still is."

"Yes, of course," assented Miss Hilton, warmly, "and you say that she had been brought up carefully, so that it must have been her own fault."

Mrs. Brand's eyes flashed. "Her bringing up had nothing to do with it, but you never have been and you never will be wooed with the ardor and subtlety that won poor Trixy. The man who asks you to be his wife is tolerable certain of securing you. You apparently think that he asked of Trixy what was most precious to her with the same mild eagerness with which he asked you to be his wife."

The girl flushed deeply. "Then you think," she faltered, after a while, "that one should refuse to marry a man because he had ever failed in that way."

"No, I do not," said Mrs. Brand, slowly. "That would be cruel, I think. I am not a believer in Eternal Punishment, you see, and I think it quite possible for even so self-indulgent a creature as a man to repent of sin, and be done with it. The question just turns on that."

"And yet if the cases were reversed, he would not marry me, no matter how repentant I was."

"No." Mrs. Brand thought for a few minutes. Then she said, "Nobody can calculate the benefit to the world of a rigid standard of purity for women. The standard for men can never be improved by lowering the standard for women, and women know that. All through the ages they have been struggling to lift men up to their own standard. And some time they will succeed."

As Miss Hilton rose to go she said, with affected flippancy: "Well, one might give up a man because one happened to find out something about him, and then marry another who was just as bad."

A tender feeling of pity surged over Mrs. Brand as she looked at the girl whose heart was still fresh and sweet with the dews of youth, but whose lips already bore the taint of a vicious philosophy. She laid her hands gently upon the young shoulders. "I have not talked to you about Trixy," she said, looking straight into the clear eyes that quickly hid themselves from her, "because I can not. But I can say that I am afraid you do not realize the character of the man who wishes to marry you."

The girl's lip curled. "No, I don't," she said, drily, "and recommendations from his last place are not required,— at least by mother — his bank-account is all that could be asked."

After she was gone Mrs. Brand went back to her memorandum. But the impetus necessary to carry her through her task was gone, for she could not banish from her mind saddening thoughts of the girl, across the fair Eden of whose life the serpent was busy prospecting his trail. "For of course she will marry him. Ultimately she will tell her mother all she has learnt from me, and Mrs. Hilton will be horrified at my vulgarity, and the girl will be hurried and worried into marrying him. And then the avenging of Trixy will begin."

CHAPTER XIX

"I WISH I was an iceberg," sighed Chrys, wearily.

"I'm afraid you'd find it very cold," laughed Mrs. Brand.

"But you see, Aunt Cecily, they don't have any work to do at all, only to keep still and make ice for ice cream."

"And what work have you to do, I'd like to know?"

"Why, Aunt Cecily, I've been working all day trying to fix my old engine, and it won't fix," said the child, tearfully. "I'd like to go up to Heaven and trade it off onto God for a thousand, thousand marbles. Then I'd be borned over again with a good start. And now there is nothing that makes me happy. Jane boiled my egg upside down for breakfast this morning; I know she did, Aunt Cecily. And Miss Lee says I haven't any Dandy up in Heaven at all, and that it's very naughty to believe such things."

Mrs. Brand smiled at this pathetic accumulation of disasters, but she cuddled the little, desolate figure up in her arms, and when at last she went away, she left Chrys fully convinced that Miss Lee at least would never have a horse to ride in Heaven, for which she was much to be pitied. And as it was satisfactorily proved that the egg had been eaten right end up, it was conceded that the upside-down boiling might as well be overlooked.

She was on her way to Moon Street, where she had spent most of the last week, for the sands of Trixy's life were nearly run out now. When she reached the bare, little room she found one of the busy, over-burdened mothers in the tenement sitting beside the bed.

"'Tain't much longer you'll have to be sittin' round here," she said encouragingly to Mrs. Brand, as she paused a moment at the door before going. "Why, I wouldn't give that for her chances to get through the night, and Dr. Challoner said as much himself this morning."

"Poor Trixy!" said Mrs. Brand.

"That's all very well, my dear," with a patronizing tolerance for one whose views on the mysteries of life and death could not be expected to be other than sentimental, "but if you'd had a husband and ten children a draggin' on you for a score of years you'd be glad every time there was a little more breathin' room for somebody."

Mrs. Brand knew better than to misunderstand this rigidly practical view of the case, for the woman who voiced it had one of the kindest hearts that ever beat. It was simply the crude utterance of that philosophy from which in the slums there can be no escape.

Left alone, she hunted up the work that she always kept on hand there, and as her needle flew in and out of the coarse, little frock, her eager thoughts kept pace with it. She looked around the room with a pathetic sense of coming change. It was here that she had entered into the great depths of unselfish, human experience, here that sin and suffering had first made themselves poignant realities to her, for the cure of which something more was demanded than a down pillow and a glib prescription for regeneration.

She got up, and leaned over the bed to look at the still, sleeping face. The glow and curve of radiant youth were gone, but in their stead was the flowering forth of the soul in its beauty. There was an exquisite smile upon the pallid lips as of one seeing visions not of this world. For in these last days the weak gates of flesh seemed powerless to imprison the ardent spirit that had so often bruised itself against them, but which now ventured unafraid beyond them.

It was a miracle to her, this new, this regenerate Trixy, who dwelt with the joyful anticipations of a sainted seer upon the time when she should behold "the King in His beauty." Was it all the delusion of a fevered brain of which disease had destroyed the delicate balance?

What a blank it would make in her life when Trixy was gone! For she had grown to have a real affection for the girl to whom she had ministered so long, and whom she counted it now her privilege to have understood so well. Her life seemed suddenly to stretch out before her, an infinite waste of years to be filled in as well as might be, perhaps in fitful effort for these people. For she knew many of them now, better than anyone else did, and she had a grim perception of the fact that, without any invitation on her part, there was a harvest waiting for her hand. A career? — she might have it for the choosing, but ah, no! That was not what she craved.

There had been no sound in the room, but all at once she felt an insistent demand upon her, and she lifted her head to meet Trixy's wide, clear eyes fixed upon her with an intensity of expression that was heightened by the perfect stillness of her face.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs. Brand asked, gently.

The girl's face lit up with sudden animation. "Listen!" she exclaimed, in a loud, clear whisper. "They will soon come for me, and before I go we must sing."

"Sha'n't we wait for Emmy?" asked Mrs. Brand, with a thought for the toiling sister whose opportunities had been submerged for the sake of this one. At the same time she felt a pang of alarm at the sense of being alone in such a crisis, for she had never seen death. It was growing dark, and she rose to light the lamp, wondering desperately what she should do if someone did not come.

"Emmy knows," said Trixy, softly. Just what she meant was not clear, and in another moment she had begun to sing in a thin, quavering voice, her favorite hymn. She seemed upborne by some mysterious accession of strength, and in response to an insistent pressure of her hand Mrs. Brand joined in the singing, her full contralto mingling strangely with the weird, sharp notes of the dying girl.

Trixy lay with her head thrown back upon the pillows, a rapt upward gaze upon her face, for she was thrilled with the exaltation of an experience so full of meaning to her, and the dramatic fervor of her voice defined itself vividly against the murmured harmony of the other as they sang the long hymn through to the end.

No, this could not be death, this strong, vehement utterance of the soul's most ardent longings. But even as the thought came to Mrs. Brand the singing ceased, and a strange, pulsating silence filled the room like the darkening peace before a swiftly moving storm. The fictitious strength that had sustained Trixy was suddenly gone, and she lay with closed eyes, the breath coming in light, uncertain gasps through her parched lips. Already there had been breathed upon her the mysterious and indefinable change of expression that spiritualizes even a sinful face in death, and with the awe of that transformation upon her Mrs. Brand sank to her knees beside the bed.

Trixy was speaking again in a faint, broken whisper.

"Pray! I want you to pray, now!"

Instinctively Mrs. Brand shook her head. "Oh, Trixy," she said, "I cannot."

But as a look of agony came into the wide, dark eyes so entreatingly fixed upon her face, she felt a creeping shame at her refusal, and in a moment more she had crushed herself out of sight, and coerced her faltering lips into prayer.

It was not until the first, crude sentences were passed that she quite realized what she was doing. But a rush of pity filled her heart, and it became not so hard a thing to take this bruised and broken life that had missed its way in this world, and give it into the certain keeping of One who came to seek and to save those who were lost. As she went on she gathered strength and assurance, for this did not seem like the thing she had called prayer. The room was charged with a warm, responsive Presence that she did not need to see.

Her voice sank at last into silence, but she knelt there without moving. Trixy's fingers still grasped her arm, but they had lost their tense grip, and upon her poor, wan face rested the glory of the illumination from afar.

Mrs. Brand never knew how long she knelt there, but at last the sound of a step upon the threshold roused her, and she rose up, trembling and shrinking even from the dull light in the room. Dr. Challoner stood opposite her, looking down at Trixy. He shook his head, and then came quickly around the foot of the bed to Mrs. Brand.

"And you — you have been here all alone?"

She nodded, for it did not seem to her that she could speak. The intonation of his voice, deep and tender, stirred in her a thousand wild emotions. And she was quivering from the strain of the experience she had just undergone. Her chin began to tremble like a little child's. With only a thought of her need of him she held out her hands to him pleadingly.

"Arthur!" she cried.

And suddenly out of the mystery of death arose the mystery of life.

THE END

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